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Battle of the Ardennes 1944 (1)

St Vith and the Northern Shoulder

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Steven J Zaloga • Illustrated by Howard Gerrard

ORIGINS OF THE CAMPAIGN

Long overshadowed by the legendary defense of Bastogne, the battles around St Vith in the northern sector of the Ardennes front were the most decisive to the outcome of the German offensive of December 1944. The prime objective of Hitler's desperate gamble was to split the Allied front by assaulting across the Meuse River to the vital port city of Antwerp. The shortest route was in the northern sector, and Hitler assigned his favored Waffen-SS Panzer divisions to this mission. Spearheaded by Oberstgruppenführer "Sepp" Dietrich's 6th Panzer Army, the northern thrust contained almost two-thirds of the German armored strength. The 7th Army opposite Bastogne was assigned the dregs of the German infantry with practically no armored support. The failure of 6th Panzer Army in the opening ten days of the offensive doomed Hitler's plans. With their best routes blocked, the momentum shifted to General Hasso von Manteuffel's 5th Panzer Army in the center of the front, which attempted to redeem the offensive using a less direct approach further south near Bastogne. But by Christmas, the initiative had shifted to the American side and it was no longer a question of whether the German offensive would be defeated, but simply of when. This book focuses on the northern shoulder of the Battle of the Bulge in the vital first ten days of the campaign, concentrating on the attack by 6th Panzer Army and the American defense from St Vith to the Elsenborn Ridge.

The 9th Infantry, 2nd Infantry Division pass though the Krinkelt woods on 13 December 1944 on their way to attack towards the Roer dams. A few days later, the 1/9th Infantry would return to the area, serving as a breakwater against the 12th SS-Panzer Division at the Lausdell crossroads outside Krinkelt. (NARA)

In the autumn of 1944, the campaign on the Western Front had degenerated into a miserable slogging match along the German frontier. After the destruction of the German army in France in the summer of 1944 and the race into the Low Countries in September, the logistical support for the Allied armies became exhausted. Until Field Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery's 21st Army Group could clear the approaches to the port of Antwerp, the Allies nibbled away at German defenses. By early December Antwerp was finally operating, and the Allies began building up supplies for offensives in the new year.

Lieutenant General Bradley's 12th Army Group stretched along the German Westwall fortifications from Aachen to the Saar. The key objective in this sector was to seize the Roer dams east of Aachen. Until they were captured, they would pose a threat to any Allied attempt to cross the Roer River, since the Germans could open the dams and flood the plains to the south. There were repeated attempts to reach the Roer in November, including armored attacks on the muddy plains east of Aachen and a bloody attempt to secure the approaches to the dams through the Hürtgen forest. By mid-December Lieutenant General Courtney Hodges' First Army had succeeded in reaching the western banks of the Roer, but at an appalling cost in men and machines. The Ardennes was a "ghost front" for most of the autumn with little combat, while to the south, Lieutenant General George S. Patton's Third Army pushed out of Lorraine towards the Saar.

For the German army, the prospects were forbidding. Although the Western Front had almost collapsed completely in September, the strained Allied logistics had provided just enough breathing space for the Germans to strengthen defenses along the Westwall. These defenses held through October and November, aided in no small measure by the wretched weather, which limited Allied mobility and restricted air operations. Yet no German commander, except Hitler, had much hope that these defenses would remain viable once the Allies resumed their offensives in earnest. In the east, the main front in Poland had been dormant since August as the Red Army reinvigorated its forces for the final push into Germany. Most of the activity in the autumn was on the peripheries, especially Hungary, but there was little doubt that the New Year would bring a dreaded Soviet offensive.

CHRONOLOGY

September 1944: Hitler first mentions plans for Ardennes offensive.

11 October: Jodl submits first draft of Ardennes plan, codenamed *Wacht am Rhein*, to Hitler.

22 October: Senior German commanders are briefed on the Ardennes plan.

Early November: First German units begin moving into the Eifel for the offensive.

Mid-November: US 99th Division arrives in Ardennes, takes over Monschau sector mid-November.

9–10 December: US Army G-2 intelligence sees no immediate threat of German offensive operations.

10 December: US Army begins another offensive against Roer dams with first objectives near Wahlerscheid.

11 December: US 106th Division arrives near St Vith and takes over Schnee Eifel defense from 2nd Infantry Division.

***0400,* 16 December:** Infantry in 5th Panzer Army sector begins infiltration past Schnee Eifel.

***0430,* 16 December:** Operation *Herbstnebel* (Autumn Mist) begins with opening barrages against forward US positions in Ardennes.

***0700,* 16 December:** German preparatory artillery ends.

0700–0800: Infantry begins advancing.

***Afternoon,* 16 December:** Major General Robertson begins moving 2nd Infantry units back towards Krinkelt to reinforce flank. 3rd Fallschirmjäger Division takes Lanzerath; Krewinkel–Losheim Gap open.

***Afternoon–Evening,* 16 December:** Major General Middleton commits CCB/9th Armored Division to 106th Division; Lieutenant General Omar Bradley allots 7th Armored Division to VIII Corps; Eisenhower agrees to shift XVIII Airborne Corps to Ardennes.

***Evening*, 16 December:** After 277th Volksgrenadier Division fails to penetrate Krinkelt woods, Gruppenführer Hermann Preiss orders 12th SS-Panzer Division *Hitlerjugend* to commit armor to make breakthrough.

***0330,* 17 December:** Kampfgruppe (KG) Peiper begins drive at Buchholz.

***0900,* 17 December:** 106th Division encircled as 18th Volksgrenadier Division reaches Schönberg.

***1500,* 17 December:** 12th Volksgrenadier Division finally takes Losheimergraben.

***1500,* 17 December:** Massacre of US POWs by KG Peiper at Baugnez crossroads.

***1800,* 17 December:** KG Peiper halts on approaches to Stavelot.

***2400,* 17 December:** 12th Volksgrenadier Division takes Mürringen.

***0700,* 18 December:** KG Peiper begins attack on Stavelot.

***1000,* 18 December:** KG Peiper passes through Stavelot by this time.

***1200,* 18 December:** Bridges blown at Trois Ponts, forcing KG Peiper to La Gleize.

***Afternoon,* 18 December:** KG Peiper reaches La Gleize, probes sent west to find route to Werbomont.

***Evening,* 18 December:** 12th SS-Panzer Division *Hitlerjugend* fails to take Krinkelt-Rocherath, Gruppenführer Preiss orders division to move west instead. Major General Robertson decides to pull back from Krinkelt-Rocherath to Elsenborn Ridge.

***0230,* 19 December:** First major attack by 12th SS-Panzer Division *Hitlerjugend* against 1st Infantry Division at Dom Bütgenbach crossroads.

19 December: Eisenhower meets with senior US commanders to plan further responses to German attack.

***1200,* 19 December:** US troops retake control of Stavelot, cutting off KG Peiper.

***Afternoon,* 19 December:** CCB/7th Armored Division begins deploying near St Vith.

21 December: 12th SS-Panzer Division *Hitlerjugend* abandons attacks on Dom Bütgenbach.

***0800,* 22 December:** Obersturmbannführer Skorzeny's Panzer Brigade 150 launches attack on Malmedy but fails.

22 December: Montgomery takes command of US units in northern shoulder of the Ardennes.

***0600,* 23 December:** US forces begin withdrawal from St Vith salient.

***0200,* 24 December:** KG Peiper begins escape from La Gleize.

OPPOSING PLANS

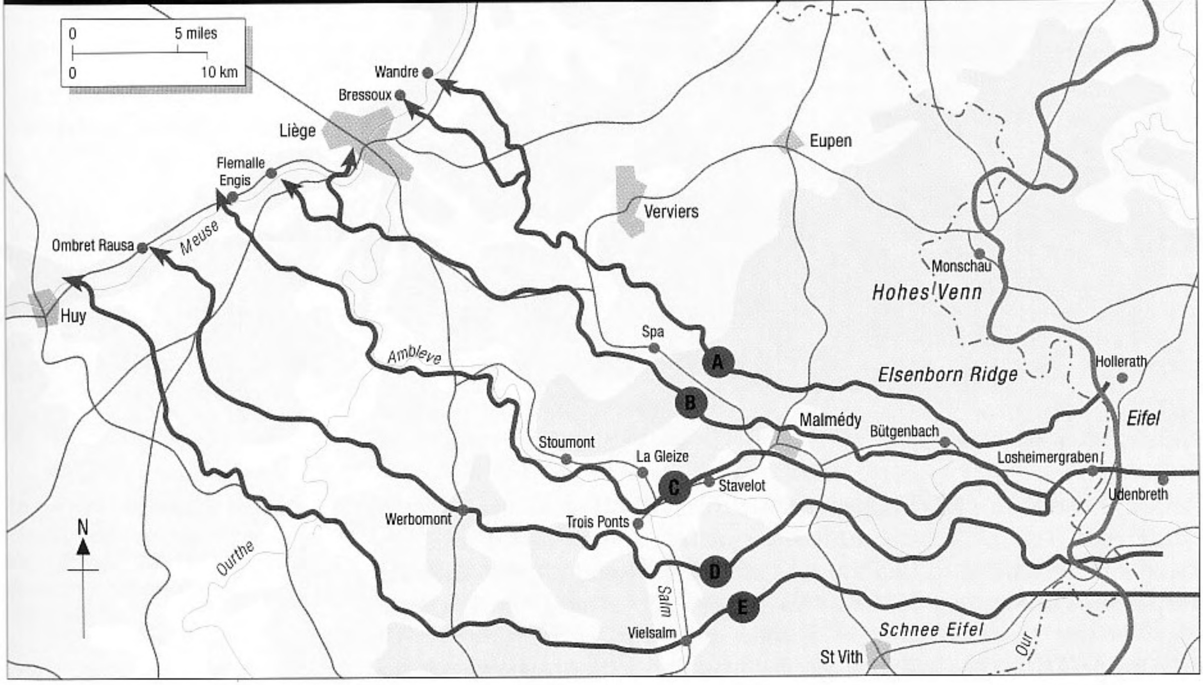
GERMAN PLANS

The idea for the Ardennes offensive came to Hitler in mid-September 1944 during his recuperation from the 20 July 1944 bomb plot. Albert Jodl, the chief of the Wehrmacht operations staff, made a casual mention that the Ardennes was the most weakly held sector of the Allied front. Hitler immediately connected this remark with the bold Panzer drive across the Meuse in 1940 that had led to the stunning victory over France. Given Germany's desperate circumstances Hitler convinced himself that a success in the west could change the course of the war. In his fevered mind, the alliance between Britain and the United States was fragile, and if their forces could be separated by an assault to the sea, the Allied front would collapse. Hitler dreamed that a third to a half of the Allied divisions on the western front could be destroyed. A similar offensive in other theaters held out no opportunity. Jodl was assigned the task of elaborating Hitler's plans and he submitted the first draft on 11 October 1944.

The Ardennes offensive was shaped by earlier German counter-offensives. Two previous Panzer operations against the advancing US Army – near Mortain in early August and in Lorraine in September – had failed. Although the attacking German forces had modest numerical

A 9th Infantry squad huddles in a snowy ditch during the fighting on the approaches to "Heartbreak Crossroads" near Wahlerscheid on 13 December 1944. (NARA)

PLANNED ROUTES OF ADVANCE OF 6TH PANZER ARMY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superiority in both battles, this was not enough when faced by American artillery and air power. Hitler concluded that the Ardennes operation would require substantial superiority in men and materiel. Since only four American divisions were holding the Ardennes, Hitler calculated that a total of about 30 German divisions would be needed. Given the weakened state of the Wehrmacht after the summer disasters, such a force could not be assembled until late November 1944, but the poor weather in the late autumn would hobble Allied air power. An essential element of the plan, first dubbed *Wacht am Rhein* (Watch on the Rhine), was total secrecy. Since the attempted military coup of July 1944, Hitler had a pathological distrust of the commanders of the regular army. Details of the plan were kept to an absolute minimum of planners, and the movement of troops and materiel to the German frontier in the late autumn was explained as an effort to prepare for Allied offensives over the Rhine that were expected in the New Year.

The offensive was aimed at the Ardennes sector most weakly held by the US Army from Monschau in the north to Echternach in the south, a distance of about 60km. The neighboring German sector in the Eifel was heavily wooded, shielding fresh German units from aerial observation. The offensive would be conducted by three armies: two Panzer armies in the north and center and a relatively weak infantry army on the southern flank to block counterattacks against this shoulder. Hitler would have preferred to use only his trusted Waffen-SS Panzer divisions, but there were not enough. So he settled on an attack by the 6th (SS) Panzer Army in the vital northern sector with a parallel assault by the 5th Panzer Army in the center. The 6th Panzer Army sector from Monschau to St Vith was the most important, since success here would secure the shortest route over the Meuse through Liège to

The farm roads leading out of the Eifel in the northern sector were churned up by the advancing columns of Panzers and quickly became channels of mud, trapping this captured jeep being used by an officer of 1st SS-Panzer Corps. (MHI)

Antwerp. German planners believed that the main logistics network for the First US Army was in this area and its capture would assist the German attack by providing supplies as well as weakening the American response. The weakest of the attacking German armies, the 7th Army, would strike towards Bastogne. Unlike the two Panzer forces to the north, the 7th Army had virtually no armored support. Bastogne had little role in the original Ardennes plan since it was quite distant from any strategic objectives. The Waffen-SS Panzer commanders were fairly confident they could reach the Meuse river in a day or two, and the plan considered that it might be possible to reach Antwerp by the seventh day of the offensive.

In the 6th Panzer Army sector, Hitler wanted two special operations to seize vital bridges over the Meuse before they could be destroyed by retreating American forces. Operation *Grief*, led by Hitler's favorite adventurer, Obersturmbannführer Otto Skorzeny, would consist of a special brigade of English-speaking German troops disguised as Americans which would surreptitiously make its way through the American lines to capture vital objectives ahead of the main Panzer force. Operation *Stösser* was a paratroop drop to seize vital objectives deep behind the American lines while paralyzing any attempts to reinforce the northern sector.

The plan for the 6th Panzer Army was based around the use of two SS Panzer corps. After the lead infantry divisions had penetrated the American defenses, the first of these corps would secure bridgeheads over the Meuse after which the second Panzer corps would be committed to exploit towards Antwerp. Hitler allotted priority in assault guns and tank destroyer units to this sector, since the American response would be to divert forces from the Aachen area and move them south against the 6th Panzer Army's right flank. He directed that this sector receive the best infantry formations including two Fallschirmjäger (paratrooper) divisions and the 12th Volksgrenadier Division, which had distinguished itself in the recent Aachen fighting. Hitler stressed that the lead Panzer corps was to avoid becoming entangled in fighting along its right flank with counterattacking American units, a mission that should be left to a blocking force of infantry and separate tank destroyer units.

Nicknamed "Obersepp" by his troops, Oberstgruppenführer Josef "Sepp" Dietrich was the commander of the 6th Panzer Army. (NARA)

The senior commanders were brought in for their first briefing on *Wacht am Rhein* on 22 October 1944. The Western Front commander, Generalfeldmarshall Gerd von Rundstedt, and Army Group B commander, Generalfeldmarshall Walter Model, were aghast at the details of the plan which they viewed as wildly impractical. Knowing that Hitler would not be amused by their doubts, they approached Jodl with a "small solution": an alternative offensive aimed at enveloping the US forces around the recently fallen city of Aachen. Jodl was unwilling to even the broach the idea with Hitler, knowing he was determined to embark on this desperate final gamble for the fate of Germany.

Wacht am Rhein was foolhardy with few realistic chances for success. The quality of German forces in the late autumn of 1944 had plummeted drastically since the summer, due to the catastrophic losses in France and eastern Europe. The plan could only succeed if the initial American defenses could be rapidly breached and if the US Army dawdled as the Panzers raced for the Meuse. This was pinned on Hitler's exaggerated estimation of German combat power and a dismissive underestimation of American battlefield prowess. Any delays in reaching key objectives would doom the plan, since many key routes through the wooded hill country of the Ardennes could be blocked by relatively small forces at choke points and key river crossings. Delays of only a few days would be fatal since the Americans could use their better mobility to reinforce the Ardennes. The plan's logistical underpinning was suspect. Fuel and ammunition were in short supply and once the offensive began, the rail

Commander of the 5th Panzer Army, General Hasso von Manteuffel on the left confers with the Army Group B commander, Generalfeldmarshall Walter Model (right) and the inspector of the Panzer force on the western front, Generalleutnant Horst Stumpf (center). (MHI)

Commander of 1st SS-Panzer Corps was SS-Gruppenführer Hermann Preiss, who previously commanded the 1st and 3rd SS-Panzer Divisions. (NARA)

lines running into the Eifel would be relentlessly bombed regardless of weather, preventing re-supply.

At the tactical level, the two principal armies had different approaches to the initial break-in operation. The 5th Panzer Army commander, Hasso von Manteuffel was an energetic commander who had fought against US forces since the summer. As German commanders put it, he had an intuitive "finger-feel" for the battlefield based on a sharp intellect and experience. Contrary to Hitler's orders, he permitted scouting along his front, and after donning a colonel's uniform, he scouted the frontlines himself in the days before the offensive. This convinced him that there was a major gap in the American lines in the Losheim area. He also determined that American patrols were very active at night, but that they returned to base before dawn and did not resume patrols until mid-morning. Manteuffel was convinced that the planned artillery preparation would do little good against the forward US trenches and would only serve to alert the Americans. Since Hitler would not agree to an abandonment of the barrage, he won approval for an initial infiltration of American lines by assault groups followed by the artillery. Dietrich paid little attention to the details of his sector, and remained convinced that an initial barrage would soften the American defenses and make them easy to overrun. Unlike Manteuffel, he had no experience of the infernal combat in the Hürtgen forest, and had no appreciation of the challenges posed by the wooded areas that had to be breached on the first day.

AMERICAN PLANS

Allied planning in December 1944 was in a period of transition since the opening of the port of Antwerp would permit the renewal of major Allied offensive operations within a month. A meeting of the senior leadership on 7 December was inconclusive. Montgomery reiterated his proposal for a single thrust into the Ruhr, under his command of course. Having accepted Montgomery's argument in September which resulted in the disaster at Arnhem, Eisenhower no longer had much patience and reminded him that their central objective was not territorial but the defeat of the German army. To the north of the Ardennes, Bradley hoped for a repeat of the July breakout from Normandy, but until the Roer dams were seized, the US forces would have no freedom of maneuver. After attacks by specialized RAF bombers failed to bring down the dams, two corps launched another set of ground attacks on 10 December. When the second corps joined the offensive on 13 December, it ran into fierce resistance, little realizing that it had encountered the northern shoulder of the German Ardennes attack force. Although the key Wahlerscheid crossroads were taken, the American attacks stalled. To the south of the Ardennes, Patton's Third Army had finally overcome the obstinate German resistance in the fortified city of Metz, and had pushed out of Lorraine and into the Saar. The Third Army was planning an offensive on 19 December through the Westwall towards Frankfurt. In the British 21st Army Group area to the north, Field Marshal Montgomery was planning his Rhine offensive.

There were no immediate plans for operations from the "ghost front" in the Ardennes, as the mountainous Eifel area to the east promised to be every bit as difficult as the Hürtgen forest, with no strategic objectives worth the cost. First Army used the Ardennes to rest battle-weary infantry divisions and to acquaint green divisions with life at the front. In mid-December, there were four infantry divisions in the Ardennes. In the north opposite the 6th Panzer Army were the 99th Division and the 106th Division, both green units recently arrived from the United States. Further south were two veteran divisions, the 4th and 28th Divisions that had been badly mauled during the savage fighting in the Hürtgen forest in November. Portions of another green division, 9th Armored Division, were in reserve to the rear of these units.

The senior US commanders, Omar Bradley of 12th Army Group, and Courtney Hodges of First Army, both recognized that the divisions in the Ardennes were stretched much too thinly along the frontier. Middleton's VIII Corps was stretched over three times what US doctrine considered prudent but there was no expectation of a major attack in the area. This intelligence failure resulted from two major factors: the success of the Germans in strategic deception and the conviction by senior Allied commanders that the Ardennes was unsuitable for a winter offensive.

Until the Ardennes offensive, Allied signals intelligence had provided the high command with such a steady stream of reliable intelligence data that the senior leadership had come to depend upon it. There was no evidence in the top-secret Enigma traffic of a German offensive. This was a testament to the success of the Wehrmacht in maintaining a signals blackout prior to the attack. The 12th Army Group weekly intelligence summary of 9 December 1944 concluded that the Germans were in a situation analogous to late July before the Operation Cobra breakout from Normandy. German forces were unable to replace their losses and the reserve 6th Panzer Army would be kept around Cologne to eventually respond to a breakout by either the US First or Third Army. The First Army's G-2 summary of 10 December placed greater emphasis on the possibility of a German counter-offensive but again expected it against First Army after it had crossed the Roer. General K. Strong, Eisenhower's G-2, was so alarmed by accumulating if inconclusive evidence of German reinforcement of the Ardennes that he visited Bradley in early December to express his misgivings. Bradley heard him out but repeated his belief that no strategic objectives were in the path of an attack through the Ardennes.

Colonel Oscar Koch, the Third Army G-2, convinced Patton of the likelihood of a German attack against the First Army's VIII Corps in the Ardennes, with the 6th Panzer Army as its likely spearhead. Koch and Patton did not share the view that the Germans were waiting for a First Army offensive, arguing that the likely breakthrough of the Westwall in the Third Army sector in mid-December should have caused the Germans to move part of their reserve towards the Saar in response. The fact that they had not moved suggested that they had more immediate plans to the north. On 13 December 1944, Patton sent a message to Eisenhower's headquarters warning of an Ardennes attack, and echoing Strong's concerns.

Bradley didn't think that the Germans were foolhardy enough to launch a winter attack in an area with such a restricted road network with very strong American forces on either flank. Such an assessment was the

Standartenführer Hugo Kraas commanded the 2nd SS-Panzergrenadier Regiment until assigned to command the 12th SS-Panzer Division *Hitlerjugend*. (NARA)

Lieutenant General Courtney Hodges commanded the First US Army in the Ardennes. (NARA)

classic intelligence error of mirror-imaging an enemy's intentions base on one's own inclinations. The senior American commanders lik Eisenhower, Bradley, and Hodges, were conservative and risk-averse i their operational planning and so could not imagine the perspective someone as desperate and reckless as Hitler. Audacious commanders suc as Patton made a more astute assessment of German intentions. In the en Bradley was proven correct that the German attack was a foolish adventur But the risky deployment of such a thin cover force in the Ardennes shoul have been accompanied by a more deliberate intelligence effort, especial in view of the accumulating evidence of German activity in the Eifel are in the days prior to the offensive. Bradley's G-2, Brigadier General Edwi Sibert, was later sacked.

After nearly three months of bloody fighting in the mud and fores along the Westwall, Bradley continued to voice the hope that th Germans would emerge from their Westwall fortifications for an all-ou fight. He got far more than he wished.

Weather and Terrain

Wacht am Rhein was strongly affected by weather and terrain condition Weather would prove a very mixed blessing for the German attack. C the one hand, early December was overcast which limited Allied a reconnaissance before the offensive began, and Allied air attacks aft the attack started. But this also meant that Luftwaffe attempts to provic air support for the offensive would be frustrated by the weather.

In terms of ground conditions, the weather had generally adver effects on the initial phase of the German attack. The autumn weather Belgium had been wetter than usual and the soil was saturated and mudd Temperatures for the first week of the offensive were slightly above freezir during the day, though often below freezing at night. There was a tha on 18 December, and the temperatures were not cold enough un 23 December to actually freeze the soil to any depth. This severely limite German mobility since vehicles, even tanks, became bogged down aft they left the roads. US forces had dubbed the condition "a front one tar wide" since all traffic was road-bound. The muddy fields channele German attack forces down available roads, and made towns and roa junctions especially important. German schemes to bypass centers resistance were impossible for the Panzer columns and their essenti support vehicles. A divisional commander later recalled that the mu "played a decisive role since even undamaged tracked vehicles stuck fa This was decisive because, towards the end of the war, our own infant attacked unwillingly and reluctantly if there was no armored support."

Although the popular image of the Battle of the Bulge is of snow-covered terrain, in fact, snow cover was not predominant in the fir week of the fighting. Snow began to fall in the second week of Novembe but it did not cling due to frequent daylight thaws. The exception was the shady forested areas, where the snow often endured. Significant sno falls did not begin until after Christmas. The weather during the first fe days of the fighting was characterized by clinging ground fog especially the early morning hours with frequent spells of rain or freezing rain, ar occasional snow at night.

The northern Ardennes consists of rolling hills with woods interspers with open farm land. The forests were often cultivated pine stanc

Major General Troy Middleton commanded the VIII Corps from Bastogne to the Schnee Eifel. (NARA)

harvested for wood. As a result, the spacing of the trees was uniform, with little undergrowth, and a pattern of fire breaks and narrow forest trails for logging. But some of the rougher hill terrain in the river valleys were pine barrens[1], with thick undergrowth. The roads from the German border into Belgium were mostly graveled. While adequate for infantry, the tanks and tracked vehicles churned them into glutinous mud trenches, trapping subsequent vehicle columns.

The initial attack area for the 6th Panzer Army was forested, varying in depth from about three to six kilometers. Beyond this was a band of open farm terrain with better roads. To the north was the Elsenborn Ridge, a shallow plateau with the upland moors of the Hohes Venn further north. This meant that once the German forces had broken out of the woods, there was a relatively open area to deploy mechanized units. The best roads out of the area towards Liège were on the Elsenborn Ridge and through Malmédy. Access via the Amblève river valley was problematic as the roads were very narrow and winding, with forested slopes on one side, and wooded drops towards the river on the other side. If this could be rapidly traversed, the region beyond was more suitable for advance.

The attack area in the 5th Panzer Army sector was significantly different since the attack was launched from farmlands towards the forested plateau of the Schnee Eifel. However, there were open areas to either side, most notably the Losheim Gap, which was a traditional access route westward. This permitted a relatively quick passage in the initial stages of the offensive, but the terrain became progressively more difficult to the west with wooded ravines and hills nearer the Meuse.

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[1] Areas where the soil is so barren (usually sandy) that pines are the only thing that will grow.

OPPOSING COMMANDERS

GERMAN COMMANDERS

Wacht am Rhein was the brainchild of Adolf Hitler. Most senior Wehrmacht commanders regarded the campaign as foolhardy. However, their influence on strategic issues had declined precipitously since the army bomb plot against Hitler of July 1944. Hitler played a central role in all the planning of *Wacht am Rhein*, and his increasingly delusional views underlay the unrealistic expectations of the campaign. Hitler's main aide in planning the Ardennes offensive was **Generaloberst Alfred Jodl**, the chief of the Wehrmacht Operations Staff. Conditioned by his traditional training to value loyalty, Jodl's unassuming manner helped him survive Hitler's irascible temper. He was injured in the bomb explosion in July 1944 and so was one of the few senior German generals to retain the Führer's confidence until the end of the war.

Field command of the German forces in the Ardennes campaign was under **Generalfeldmarshall Gerd von Rundstedt** who commanded the western theater. Rundstedt was respected by Hitler for his competence, but was outside Hitler's circle of intimates due to his blunt honesty on military matters. Unlike Jodl, Rundstedt was not afraid to tell Hitler his misgivings about his more outlandish schemes, and so he was kept out of the planning until Jodl had completed the essential details. When finally handed a copy of the draft, Hitler had personally marked it "Not to be altered". Although the American press often referred to the Ardennes attack as the "Rundstedt Offensive", in fact he had little connection to its planning or execution. After studying the plan, he concluded that the Wehrmacht would be very lucky indeed if it even reached the Meuse, never mind Antwerp.

The senior field commander for the offensive was **Generalfeldmarshall Walter Model**, commander of Army Group B. By 1944, Model had become Hitler's miracle worker. When all seemed hopeless and defeat inevitable, Hitler called on the energetic and ruthless Model to save the day. After a distinguished career as a Panzer commander during the Russian campaign, in March 1944 he became the Wehrmacht's youngest field marshal when assigned to the key position of leading Army Group North Ukraine. When Army Group Center was shattered by the Red Army's Operation Bagration in the summer of 1944, Model was assigned by Hitler the almost hopeless task of restoring order, which he accomplished. In mid-August, after German forces in France had been surrounded in the Falaise Gap, Hitler recalled Model from the eastern front and assigned him command of Army Group B. During the Ardennes offensive Model commanded the assault force: 7th Army, 5th Panzer Army, and 6th Panzer Army. Model was equally skeptical of the plan calling it "damned fragile", but he understood Germany's

A Volksgrenadier captured during the fighting around Bütgenbach in January 1945. Many of the Volksgrenadier units were provided with snowsuits or other forms of winter camouflage prior to the Ardennes offensive. (NARA)

desperate situation and set about trying to execute the plan to the best of his ability.

The army commander most central in the attack in the northern sector was **SS Oberstgruppenführer Josef "Sepp" Dietrich**. Unlike the other senior German commanders, he had little formal officer training. Senior German commanders regarded him as an uncouth lout and a dim sycophant of the Führer. His military talents were damned with faint praise as those of a "splendid sergeant". He was a jovial, hard-drinking, and down-to-earth commander who was very popular with his troops. Brutal to opponents, Dietrich was maudlin and sentimental with his own soldiers. Dietrich had won the Iron Cross in World War I in a storm troop unit, and served in one of the few German tank units during 1918. He fought against the Poles with the Silesian militias in 1921 and returned to Bavaria to serve as a policeman since there were few opportunities in the army. Dietrich joined the Nazi party in 1928 and was promoted to command of the Munich SS (*Schutzstafflen*), a group of toughs formed as a personal guard for Hitler in the rough and tumble street politics of the fractious Weimar Republic. Hitler's trust in Dietrich as a reliable enforcer led to his appointment as the head of the enlarged *SS Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* after he became Chancellor in 1933. He demonstrated his loyalty to Hitler by rounding up his brown-shirt comrades for summary execution in the "Night of the Long Knives" in 1934 when Hitler ordered the SA (*Sturmabteilung*) crushed to curry favor with the army. The *Leibstandarte* was committed to combat for the first time during the 1939 Polish campaign, gradually shaking off their reputation as "asphalt soldiers". Dietrich was a charismatic fighter, but unprepared in intellect or training to command a large formation. So the practice began of placing him in a prominent position while at the same time assigning a talented officer as his chief of staff to carry out the actual headquarters and staff functions. Dietrich was Hitler's alter ego – a common soldier of the Great War, a man of the people, a man of action, and a polar opposite to the type of intellectual, aristocratic Prussian staff officer that Hitler so despised. Dietrich was awarded the Iron Cross 1st and 2nd Class for the undistinguished performance of the *Leibstandarte* in Poland, and the Knight's Cross for their role in the French campaign. These were the first of many preposterous awards and rank increases which Hitler used as much to rankle the blue-bloods of the German military establishment as to reward Dietrich. In 1943, he was ordered to form the 1st SS-Panzer Corps, with the considerable help of his new right hand man, Colonel Fritz Kraemer, a talented staff officer who would serve with him in the Ardennes. The 1st SS-Panzer Corps was first committed to action in Normandy where it earned a formidable reputation for its obstinate and skilled defense of Caen against British tank assaults. On 1 August 1944, Dietrich was elevated to SS Oberstgruppenführer, and a few days later, Hitler added Diamonds to his Iron Cross, one of only 27 soldiers so decorated during the war. On 14 September 1944, Hitler instructed him to begin the formation of the 6th Panzer Army. Dietrich had grown increasingly despondent over the conduct of the war, but he was too inarticulate to convey his views, and too beholden to his Nazi sponsors to press his complaints with any conviction. He vaguely blamed the setbacks at the front on "sabotage", unwilling to recognize the source of the problem was the regime he so ardently served.

The Panzergrenadiers of 1st SS-Panzer Div. were still wearing their autumn-pattern camouflage jackets during the initial phase of the Ardennes attack. This NCO is armed with a StG44 assault rifle, an innovation in infantry small arms and forebear of modern assault rifles. This photo is from a well-known series staged along the Poteau-Recht road on 17 December after a column from the 14th Cavalry Group had been ambushed. (NARA)

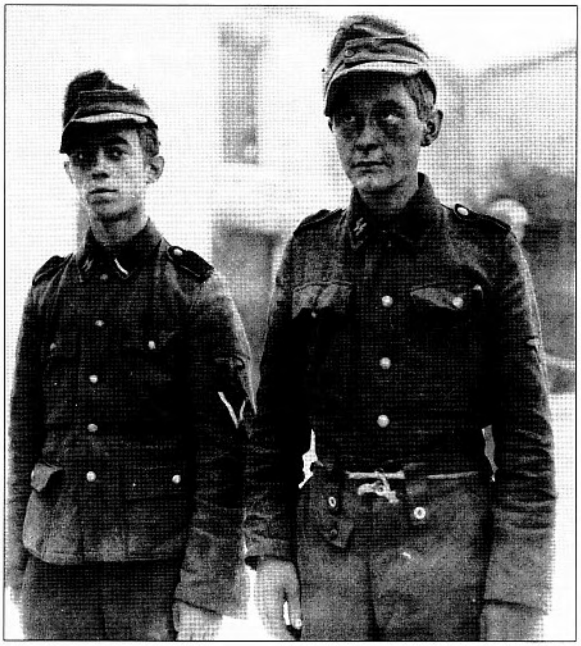
The defense of the northern shoulder of the Bulge held due in no small measure to the skilled leadership of officers like MajGen Walter Robertston, commander of the 2nd Infantry Division. Here he is seen talking with the 12th Army Group commander, LtGen Omar Bradley, shortly before the Ardennes campaign.

Dietrich's counterpart in command of the 5th Panzer Army was **General der Panzertruppen Hasso von Manteuffel**. He had none of Dietrich's political connections and started the war commanding an infantry battalion in Rommel's 7th Panzer Division in France in 1940. He won the Knight's Cross in Russia in 1941, and while still a colonel led an improvised division in Tunisia so ably that General von Arnim described him as one of his best divisional commanders. Hitler liked the brash young officer and assigned him to command the 7th Panzer Division in June 1943, and the elite *Grossdeutschland* Panzergrenadier Division later in the year. Hitler took personal interest in his career and on 1 September 1944 he was given command of 5th Panzer Army, leapfrogging to army commander in a single step, and by-passing the usual stage as a Panzer corps commander. Manteuffel learned the task the hard way during tough fighting against Patton's Third Army in Lorraine through the early autumn. His units were in continual combat with the US Army through December 1944.

AMERICAN COMMANDERS

The senior American field commander was **Lieutenant General Omar Bradley**, who commanded the 12th Army Group. This consisted of Lieutenant General William H. Simpson's Ninth Army which abutted Montgomery's 21st Army Group on the Dutch frontier, LtGen Courtney Hodges' First Army in the center from Aachen through the Ardennes, and LtGen George Patton's Third Army in the Saar. Although Bradley was junior to his three army commanders, he had formed a better impression with the Army chief of staff, George Marshall, and his immediate superior, Dwight Eisenhower who led the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF). Bradley's elevation to command over more dynamic leaders such as George Patton was in no small measure due to his better managerial talents in mastering the complexities of senior command where an appreciation for logistics was as important as tactics. Bradley was a cool infantryman in an army which was uncomfortable with the flamboyant histrionics of a charismatic cavalryman like Patton.

When Bradley was booted upstairs to command 12th Army Group in August, command of First Army fell to his aide, **Lieutenant General Courtney Hodges**. Hodges was older than Bradley and Patton, having dropped out of the US Military Academy at West Point for academic reasons. But he enlisted in the army and earned his lieutenant's bar shortly after he would have graduated. Bradley had considerable confidence in Hodges, though other American commanders felt he was not assertive enough and that he might be overly influenced by his dynamic chief of staff, Major General William Kean. His inactivity in the first days of the Ardennes fighting is something of a mystery – in the charitable view being attributed to the flu, and in the more skeptical view, to nervous exhaustion. However, he had an able staff, and Bradley played a central role in the first few days of fighting. Hodges also benefited from having some of the Army's best officers serving under him. The two corps in the northern sector near St Vith were the V Corps to the north, and the VIII Corps to its south. **Major General Leonard Gerow** of the V Corps had commanded Eisenhower in 1941 while heading the war plans division of the general staff, and was regarded as the quintessential staff officer, comfortable with planning combat operations but not leading them. To the surprise of many, he proved a very able corps commander, leading V Corps during the liberation of Paris through the Rhineland campaign. **Major General Troy Middleton** of the VIII Corps had commanded the corps since Normandy. Middleton had entered the army as a private in 1909 and had risen through the ranks to become the army's youngest regimental commander in World War I. Although he had retired before the outbreak of World War II to become a college administrator, he returned to the Army and commanded the 45th Division in Italy with distinction. Old for a corps commander, the army chief of staff remarked that he would "rather have a man with arthritis in the knee than one with arthritis in the head." When the issue of retirement was raised in 1944, Eisenhower quipped that he wanted him back in command even if he had "to be carried on a stretcher".



The shortage of manpower led the Waffen-SS to abandon their recruitment of volunteers and depend instead on draftees and transfers from the Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine. Age restrictions were also loosened, as these two young soldiers from 12th SS-Panzer Div. suggest. They were captured during the fighting around Bütgenbach and a few prisoners were as young as ten. (NARA)

Of the US Army tactical commanders in this sector of the Ardennes fighting, none made a stronger impression than **Brigadier General Bruce C. Clarke**. He began his career in the National Guard and received an appointment to the Military Academy at West Point. He spent most of the inter-war years as an engineer officer, and was transferred to the new armor branch at the beginning of the war. He commanded one of the early armored engineer battalions and was instrumental in the development of a treadway pontoon bridge that could be used easily by armored units. In 1943, he became chief of staff of the 4th Armored Division, a unit that would later become the spearhead of Patton's Third Army. By the time of the Normandy fighting in July 1944, he had been appointed to lead the division's Combat Command A (CCA). He became famous for his skilled leadership in Normandy and in the subsequent

The workhorse of the German infantry divisions was the Sturmgeschütz III Ausf. G assault gun. These provided direct fire support for infantry units, but were usually in short supply. (MHI)

fighting in Lorraine where he often commanded the tank columns from the back seat of a Piper Cub observation aircraft. His unit was responsible for the defeat of the German Panzer counter-offensive around Arracourt. As an engineer rather than an infantryman, Clarke endured very slow career advancement. Patton jokingly told him that he was a "nobody" since the army chief of staff, George C. Marshall, had not recognized his name when he had pushed to get him a general's star. A similar situation befell another gifted engineer, **Brigadier General William Hoge**, who ended up commanding the CCB of 9th Armored Division alongside Clarke at St Vith. Patton succeeded in advancing Clarke to brigadier general, but he was obliged to switch units since there were no slots in the 4th Armored Division. Bradley had been very unhappy with the performance of the 7th Armored Division, and to rejuvenate the unit he elevated Robert Hasbrouck to command, and shifted Clarke to lead its Combat Command B. Hasbrouck and Clarke straightened out the problems in the division during November 1944 shortly before it was put to its greatest test at St Vith. There were a number of other excellent commanders in this sector as well, such as Major General Walter Robertson of the 2nd Infantry Division.

OPPOSING ARMIES

GERMAN FORCES

Dietrich's 6th Panzer Army, although it would later be redesignated as the 6th SS-Panzer Army, was in fact an amalgam of units from three combat arms – the regular army, the Waffen-SS, and the Luftwaffe's ground combat formations. This conglomeration was the result of the factional in-fighting of Hitler's cronies as they sought greater personal power in the final years of the Third Reich.

The shock force of the 6th Panzer Army was the 1st SS-Panzer Corps, composed of the 1st SS-Panzer Division *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* and the 12th SS-Panzer Division *Hitlerjugend*. The Waffen-SS was the Praetorian Guard of the Nazi regime and allotted the best equipment. The diminishing fighting power of these once formidable formations was evidence of the steady erosion of German military capabilities in 1944. Even though German industry was at its peak in the production of tanks and other weapons, the German armed forces were unable to transform this industrial windfall into increased combat power due to shortages of fuel and trained personnel. As a result, these Panzer divisions were significantly weaker than their American counterparts in most respects. So for example, the 1st SS-Panzer Division had only 34 PzKpfw IV, 37 Panther and 30 Kingtiger tanks for a total of 101 tanks, and the 12th SS-Panzer Division only 39 PzKpfw IV and 38 Panthers for a total of 77 tanks. A comparable American division at the time such as the 9th Armored Division had 186 M4 medium tanks, while the two heavy armored divisions (2nd and 3rd) had about 230 medium tanks. The 12th SS-Panzer Division

Aside from tanks, one of the most common German armored vehicles during the fighting on the northern shoulder was the Jagdpanzer IV/70 tank destroyer. This one from 1st SS-Panzerjäger Abteilung is seen in action with Kampfgruppe Hansen during the fighting with the 14th Cavalry Group along the Recht-Poteau road on 18 December 1944. (NARA)

The 82nd Airborne Division was rushed to fill the gap created by the collapse of the 106th Division on the Schnee Eifel, and here a BAR squad automatic weapons team from Co. C, 325th Glider Infantry are seen in action in Belgium on 23 December 1944. (NARA)

was so weak in tanks that a tank destroyer formation, 560th schweres Panzerjäger Abteilung, equipped with Jagdpanzer IV and Jagdpanther tank destroyers, was attached. The Panzergrenadier battalions were supposed to be equipped with SdKfz 251 half-tracks, but in fact only one-in-four battalions were so equipped.

A more significant problem was the declining quality of troops in these units. This affected the units from top to bottom, from the officers to the ranks. Both divisions had been destroyed in the summer 1944 fighting and reconstituted in November 1944. One of the corps' officers later wrote "The level of training of the troop replacements was very poor. The Panzergrenadiers had been soldiers for only four to six weeks but instead of receiving basic training in this period, they had been employed cleaning away debris in towns damaged by air raids. Replacements in the Panzer regiments had never ridden in a tank, let alone driven one, or fired from one, or sent messages from one by radio. Furthermore, the majority of the drivers have not had more than one or two hours driving lessons before obtaining their driver's license. The casualties in officers had been exceptionally high during the hard battles of the summer, so that including the battalion and regimental commanders, it was mostly officers inexperienced in combat who had to lead these troops." Previously, the Waffen-SS had relied on volunteers but, by the autumn of 1944, it was forced to accept transfers from Luftwaffe ground personnel as well as underage recruits. The training problem was exacerbated by restrictions imposed by the lack of fuel, preventing any significant formation training above platoon level after the units were re-equipped in mid-November. There was also very little firing practice with live ammunition. The two Panzer divisions were rated only as *Kampfwert III*, that is suitable for defensive operations, *Kampfwert I* indicating suitability for offensive operations. The Waffen-SS divisions had won their reputation for stubborn defensive fighting and had far less experience in offensive Panzer operations. Due to the declining training, tactics were unsophisticated and tended towards the

US Army anti-tank defense was poorly served by the cumbersome 3in. anti-tank gun which had indifferent performance against contemporary German tanks and was too heavy to be easily maneuvered by its crew. This gun belonged to the 801st Tank Destroyer Battalion, attached to the 14th Cavalry Group, and was knocked out in Honsfeld during an encounter with the spearhead of Kampfgruppe Peiper on the morning of 17 December. (NARA)

brute force approach. The chief of staff of the neighboring 5th Panzer Army complained that their lack of road discipline was a major cause of the traffic jams that hindered the initial advance, and that their reconnaissance skills were poor. Commanders of the Panzer spearheads such as Peiper were remarkably indifferent to the requirements for bridging and other engineering support during offensive operations.

If the situation in the elite formations was discouraging, it was even worse in the three infantry divisions of 1st SS-Panzer Corps that were expected to make the initial breakthrough. The best of the three divisions was the 12th Volksgrenadier Division (VGD), which was personally selected by Hitler to lead the attack due to its excellent performance in the defense of Aachen. Having suffered heavy casualties in the autumn fighting, it had been withdrawn into Germany only on 2 December for hasty refitting prior to the offensive. The other Volksgrenadier divisions had been created to fill the growing gap in infantry divisions in the German order of battle. They were easier and cheaper to raise, having less support equipment than normal infantry divisions, and older personnel of very mixed quality with an average age of 35 years. Some of their troops were drawn from the barrel-scrapings of the personnel pool, others were transfers from idle support units of the navy and air force. The 277th VGD had been gutted in the Normandy fighting and reconstituted in Hungary in September 1944 after absorbing the remains of the shattered 374th VGD. It was fleshed out with young Austrian conscripts who lacked the usual German basic training, ethnic German *volksdeutsche* from eastern Europe, and Alsatians. The latter two groups were characterized by the divisional commander as "an untrustworthy element". It was rated as *Kampfwert III,* suitable for defense. Though still under strength, the division was deployed for static defense along the Westwall for most of the autumn and gradually brought up to strength with transfers from the navy and air force with no infantry training. The US Army had faced the 3rd Fallschirmjäger Division in the hedgerows of Normandy the previous summer and considered the paratroopers to be some of the toughest opponents they had ever fought.

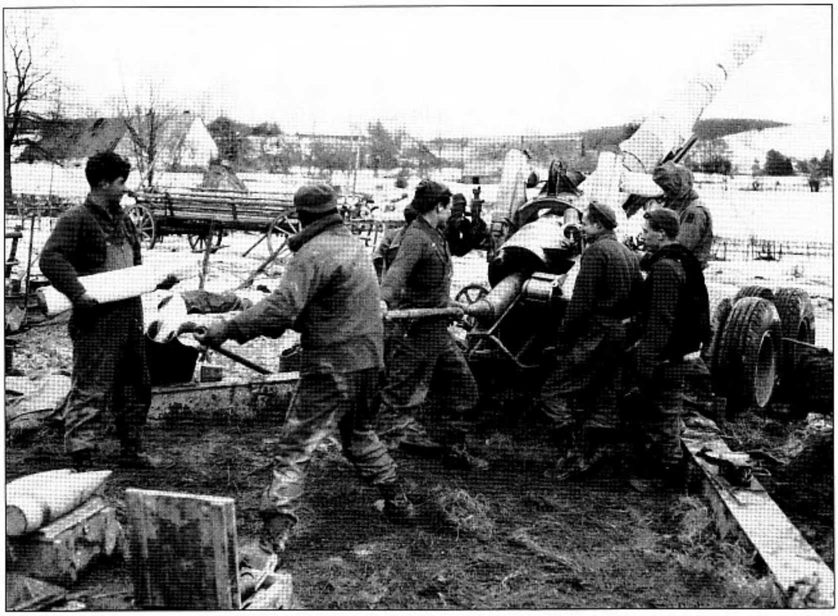
A major advantage enjoyed by US forces in the Ardennes campaign was superior artillery. This is a 155mm howitzer of the 254th Field Artillery Battalion providing support to the 82nd Airborne Division near Werbomont on 2 January 1945. (NARA)

As in the case of the Waffen-SS Panzer divisions, this division had been decimated in the Normandy fighting and was a shadow of its former self. Replacement troops came mainly from Luftwaffe support units with no infantry training to say nothing of paratroop training. Casualties among the officers and troop leaders had been crippling, and some senior command positions had been filled by Luftwaffe staff officers with no infantry experience. It had been further weakened by almost continual combat through the late autumn, and arrived in the Ardennes with little opportunity to rebuild.

Dietrich's 6th Panzer Army had two more corps, the 2nd SS-Panzer Corps, and the 67th Infantry Corps. The 2nd SS-Panzer Corps, including the 2nd SS-Panzer Division *Das Reich* and the 9th SS-Panzer Division *Hohenstaufen* was in army reserve waiting until the 1st SS-Panzer Corps completed the breakthrough to the Meuse. It saw no fighting in the initial stage of the campaign. The 67th Army Corps was located on the northern flank and consisted of Volksgrenadier units intended to serve as a blocking force.

Fuel would be a constant problem. At the outset of the campaign, the divisions carried enough fuel with them to travel 100km under normal conditions. But in the move from staging areas to the front in the days before the attack, the divisions found that the terrain and the drivers' inexperience led to such high consumption that only 50–60km could be covered with the remaining fuel. A resupply of another 100km-worth was brought up on the morning of 16 December 1944. Although a significant stockpile of fuel had been built up for the offensive, it was far behind the frontlines and difficult to move forward. The fuel situation was exacerbated by the use of tanks such as the Panther and Kingtiger that consumed 350 and 500 liters of fuel per 100km of road travel. By comparison, the PzKpfw IV consumed only 200 to 210 liters of fuel – between 40 and 60 per cent of a Panther's or Kingtiger's consumption.

Long range firepower for the US Army was provided by the 155mm gun, which was assigned to separate battalions at corps or army level. This is a 155mm gun of the 981st Field Artillery Battalion in action near Heppenbach in the Schnee Eifel towards the end of the Ardennes campaign in late January 1945. (NARA)



The quality of artillery support was mixed. Besides the divisional artillery, each of the three corps had an additional heavy artillery battalion with guns of between 150mm and 210mm caliber. The 1st SS-Panzer Corps also had two Nebelwerfer rocket artillery brigades, three heavy artillery batteries and two to three *Volksartillerie* corps. These later formations each had six battalions of artillery, but were formed from a wide range of artillery types including captured foreign designs, presenting an ammunition headache. The artillery was supposed to be allotted a 14-day supply of ammunition but in fact received about ten days supply. Resupply after the start of the offensive was very meager since the dumps were near Bonn and subject to Allied air interdiction.

AMERICAN FORCES

The principal US units opposite the 6th Panzer Army were two green infantry divisions, the 99th and 106th Divisions. The 99th Division, the "Battlin' Babes", was the southernmost unit of Gerow's V Corps, stretching along the Siegfried Line from Hofen to Lanzerath. It had arrived in Belgium in mid-November, replaced the 9th Division on the frontline, and had become reasonably well acclimatized to the front. The division had been formed in 1942, but in March 1944, 3,000 riflemen were pulled from its ranks to make up for combat losses in Italy. Their places were filled by young men from the ASTP program.

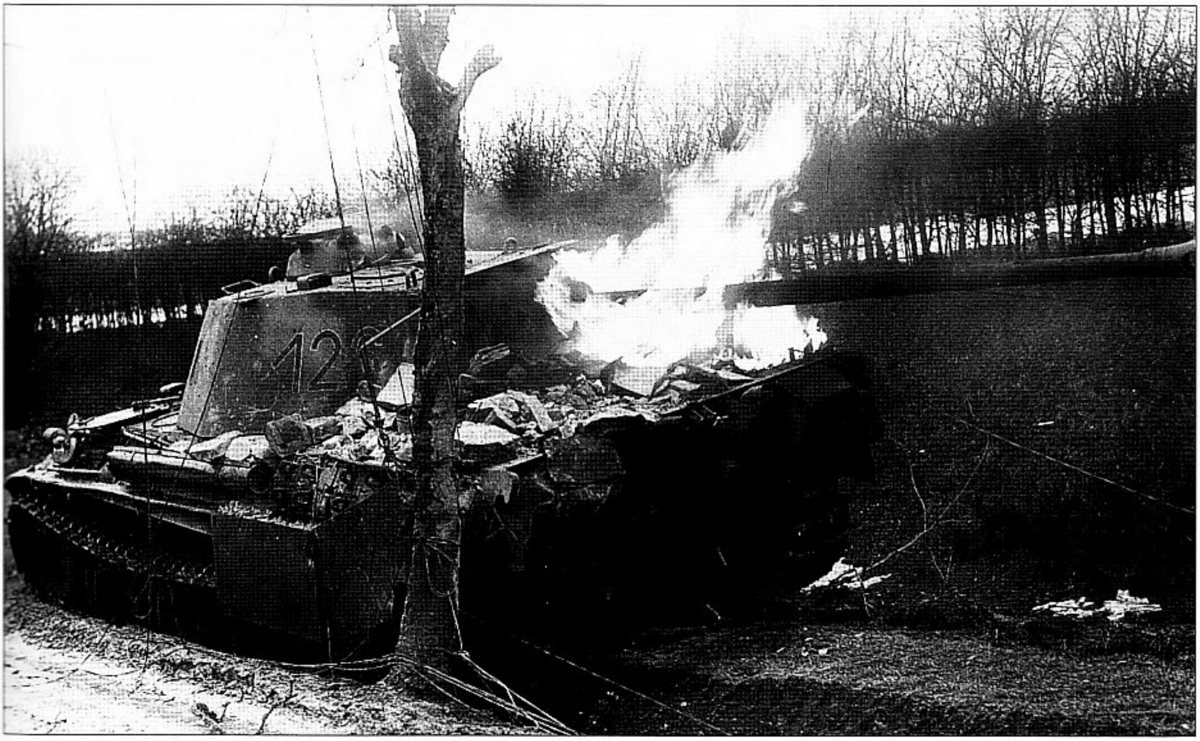
The Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) was an effort by the army chief of staff, General George C. Marshall, to divert the smartest young soldiers into advanced academic training. At a time when less than five per cent of young men went to college, Marshall did not want to waste their talents and had them sent for further schooling rather than to the battlefield. ASTP came to abrupt end in 1944 when rising casualties created an immediate need for troops, so 100,000 ASTP college students were transferred to active service. Some were sent as

Riflemen of the 393rd Infantry, 99th Division during the fighting around Rocherath. This regiment was deployed in the woods east of the Twin Villages, and after suffering heavy casualties, retreated into the towns. (NARA)

engineers to the secret atomic bomb program, others to technical branches of the army, but most ended up as riflemen.

Although the Ardennes was a quiet front compared to the Hürtgen forest, the division suffered moderate casualties during its first month at the front. The US Army had not paid enough attention to the need for winter clothing or boots, and what resources were available in Europe were scandalously mismanaged. Some of the division's rifle platoons had suffered 30 per cent casualties in the latter half of November, more than half due to trench foot. On the positive side, the division's forward rifle companies had time to dig in, creating a network of foxholes and shelters with log roofs that would reduce artillery casualties in the ensuing battle. The division covered a 12-mile wide sector from the hilly Monschau forest, south to the more open country near Losheim.

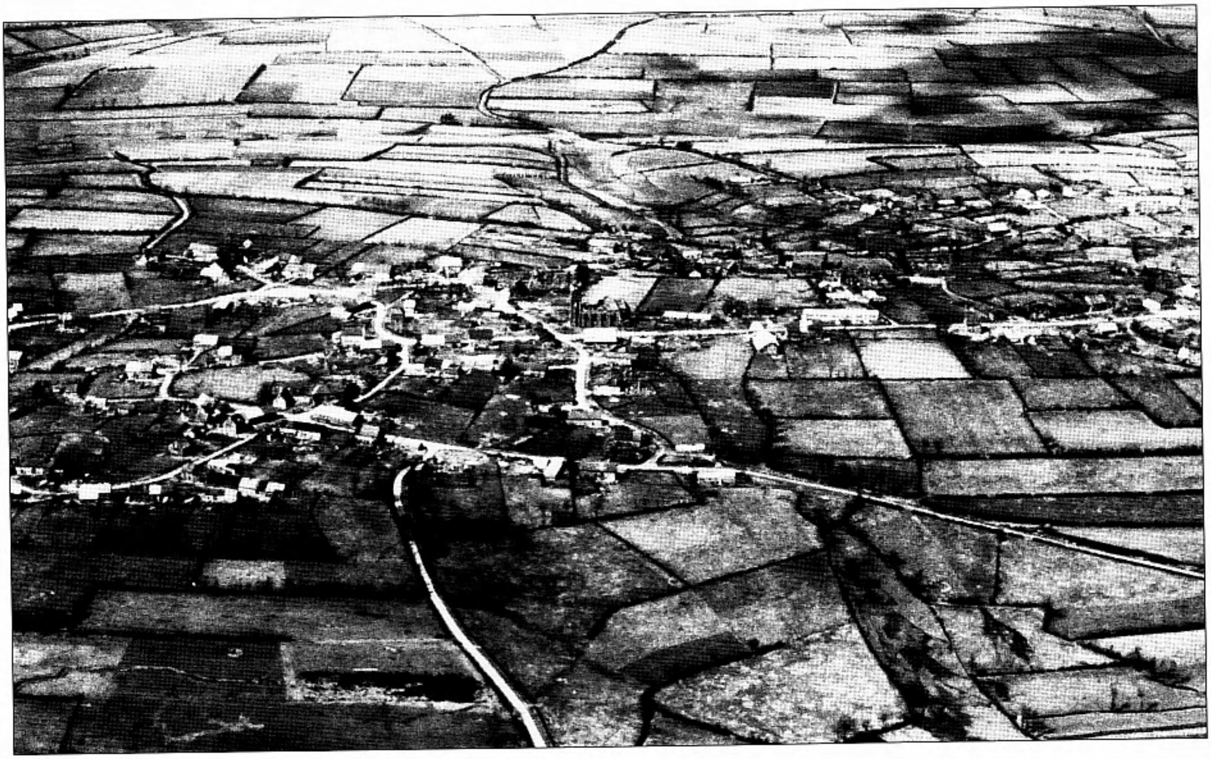
The 106th Division had a less fortunate experience. The division was formed in early 1943 and by the spring of 1944 was ready to take the field. However, from April to August 1944, the division was gutted as more than 7,000 of its riflemen were shipped off to serve as replacements. They were replaced at the last minute by a mixture of ASTP students, gunners from anti-aircraft and coastal artillery units, military policemen and service personnel. This process had hardly ended when the division was shipped off to England in October 1944. Not only did the 106th Division have less unit cohesion than the 99th Division, but it arrived much later. It took over the northern sector of Middleton's VIII Corps from the 2nd Infantry Division on 11 December, a few days before the German attack. To make matters worse, the division was thinly spread along a 15-mile front projecting into German lines on the Schnee Eifel plateau. The previous tenants of this position, the 2nd Infantry Division, had complained about its precarious location, but higher headquarters were reluctant to pull the units back as they sat within the German Westwall defensive belt.



This was one of five Panthers of the first company of 12th SS-Panzer Regiment that fought their way into Krinkelt around 0730 on 18 December. Four were knocked out by bazooka teams and anti-tank guns and this vehicle escaped down the Büllingen road where it was knocked out by a M10 3in. GMC of the 644th Tank Destroyer Battalion around 1100hrs. It had 11 bazooka hits, several 57mm hits and three 3in. impacts in the rear. (NARA)

The 99th and 106th Divisions sat on the boundary between Gerow's V Corps to the north, and Middleton's VIII Corps to the south. Between them was the eight mile Losheim Gap. This area was covered by the 14th Cavalry Group with two armored cavalry reconnaissance squadrons. These cavalry groups, as their name suggests, were intended for scouting and not positional defense. Although they had considerable firepower for such small units, this was mostly mounted on the squadrons' jeeps and light armored vehicles and was of little use when the unit was deployed in a dismounted defensive position. The squadrons' tactics were summarized as "sneak and peek", and they were spread much too thinly to create any sort of credible barrier. It was not unusual for a cavalry group to be placed along a corps boundary during offensive operations, since they could be used for mobile screening, but they were not well suited to this role when the mission became defensive. The first of its squadrons deployed on 10 December and the second did not follow until 15 December. As a result, the corps boundary, which happened to be situated on a traditional invasion route, was weakly protected by a unit very ill-suited to a defensive role. It was no coincidence that the German plan aimed its heaviest strike force through this area.

In view of the composition of the attacking German forces, it is worth mentioning the anti-tank capabilities of the US Army. The organic anti-tank defense of the infantry divisions was a license copy of the British 6-pdr, the 57mm anti-tank gun. There were 57 in each division, with 18 in each regiment. By 1944 this gun was obsolete, and the official history of the campaign pungently describes them as "tank fodder". A more useful weapon was the 2.35in. anti-tank rocket launcher, more popularly called the bazooka. There were 557 in each division, and they were generally allotted on a scale of one per rifle squad. Their warhead



An aerial view of Krinkelt (to the left) and Rocherath (to the right). This view looks westward. (MHI)

was not as effective as comparable German weapons such as the *Panzerfaust* or *Panzerschreck,* but in the hands of a brave soldier, they could disable German tanks by a well-placed side or rear hit. Most infantry divisions had an attached tank destroyer battalion equipped with 36 3in. anti-tank guns. Unfortunately, in the spring of 1943, the organization of these units was changed, and a portion of the force was converted from self-propelled M10 3in. gun motor carriages to towed 3in. guns based on a mistaken assessment of the Tunisian campaign. These towed battalions proved to be poorly suited to conditions in the European theater, and the two battalions attached to the infantry in the St Vith sector were this configuration, as was the battalion attached to the unfortunate 14th Cavalry Group.

There were a few bright spots in the American dispositions. The battle-hardened 2nd Infantry Division had been pulled off the Schnee Eifel in early December with the arrival of the 106th Division, and had been shifted northward to take part in the V Corps offensive against the Roer dams in mid-December. Some elements of the division were still intermixed with the 99th Division or stationed on the nearby Elsenborn Ridge. The proximity and combat readiness of this unit would play a crucial role in the US Army's subsequent ability to hold the northern shoulder of the Bulge.

ORDER OF BATTLE – NORTHERN SECTOR

GERMAN FORCES

6th Panzer Army	***Oberstgruppenführer Josef Dietrich***
1st SS-Panzer Corps	*Gruppenführer Hermann Preiss*
1st SS-Panzer Division	Oberführer Wilhelm Mohnke
12th SS-Panzer Division	Standartenführer Hugo Kraas
12th Volksgrenadier Division	Generalmajor Gerhard Engel
277th Volksgrenadier Division	Oberst Wilhelm Viebig
3rd Fallshirmjäger Division	Generalmajor Walther Wadehn
Panzer Brigade 150	Obersturmbannführer Otto Skorzeny

5th Panzer Army	***General Hasso von Manteuffel***
66th Army Corps	*General der Artillerie Walther Lucht*
18th Volksgrenadier Division	Oberst Gunter Hoffman-Schönborn
62nd Volksgrenadier Division	Oberst Friedrich Kittel
116th Panzer Division	Generalmajor Siegfried von Waldenberg
Führer Begleit Brigade	Oberst Otto Remer

AMERICAN FORCES

First US Army	***LtGen Courtney H. Hodges***
V Corps	*MajGen Leroy T. Gerow*
2nd Infantry Division	MajGen Walter M. Robertson
99th Infantry Division	MajGen Walter E. Lauer

VIII Corps	*MajGen Troy H. Middleton*
106th Infantry Division	MajGen Alan W. Jones
CCB, 9th Armored Division	BrigGen William Hoge

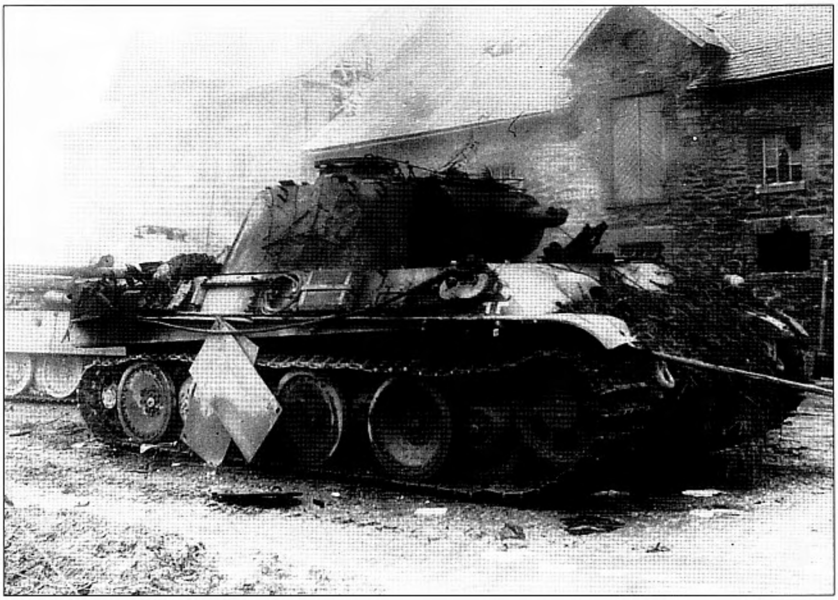
XVIII Airborne Corps (20 December)	*MajGen Matthew B. Ridgway*
82nd Airborne Division	MajGen James M. Gavin
7th Armored Division	MajGen Robert W. Hasbrouck
30th Infantry Division	MajGen Leland S. Hobbs

OPENING MOVES

Melodramatically renamed as Operation *Herbstnebel* (Autumn Mist), the Ardennes offensive began in the pre-dawn hours of Saturday, 16 December 1944. The artillery of 1st SS-Panzer Corps opened fire at 0530hrs, about two hours before dawn. The initial barrage fell on the forward lines of American trenches. The projectiles as often as not exploded in the trees overhead: a deadly pattern for exposed troops but not to the US infantry who were in log-covered trenches. Five minutes after the barrage began, the forward edge of the battlefield was illuminated by German searchlight units, which trained their lights upward against the low cloud cover, creating an eerie artificial dawn. After 15 minutes of firing, the artillery redirected their fire against secondary defensive lines and key crossroads. The fire strikes on crossroads had more effect since they often succeeded in tearing up field telephone networks. There were two more barrages, each directed further into the US defenses, finally concluding around 0700. The promised Luftwaffe support failed to materialize due to the low cloud cover. The 6th Panzer Army plan assigned five advance routes for the Panzer spearheads, labeled Rollbahn A through E.

Opening Rollbahn A and B – Battle for the Twin Villages

The northernmost element of the German attack was an attempt by the 67th Corps in the Monschau forest to push through the left wing of the 99th Division's defenses from Hofen to Wahlerscheid. This attack was



Kraas' decision to commit his Panzer regiment to the fight led to heavy tank casualties in the streets of Krinkelt. The nearest of these two Panther Ausf. G, probably that of SS-Hauptsturmführer Kurt Brodel, has been burned out and its barrel ripped off. They were knocked out in the fighting opposite the village church. (NARA)

nother view of the Panzer raveyard inside the Twin illages, in this case another of *litlerjugend*'s destroyed Panther usf. G tanks. (MHI)

carried out by the 326th Volksgrenadier Division through forested, hilly terrain not unlike the neighboring Hürtgen forest. Without any significant armor support, the attack was stopped cold by the 395th Infantry of the 99th Division. The positions of the forward rifle platoons had been registered by the US regimental artillery, and in the cases where the German infantry reached the forward trench lines, they were pummeled mercilessly while the US infantry remained within the cover of their foxholes. This was the one sector of the front where the German offensive made no significant inroads. An attack the following day met the same results, and the division was withdrawn to its start line where it remained for the remainder of the campaign.

The most significant objective in the northern sector of the 1st SS-Panzer Corps zone was the small village of Krinkelt, which blended into the neighboring village of Rocherath. As a result, fighting for Krinkelt-Rocherath is frequently called the battle of the Twin Villages. Krinkelt sat near the junction of two roads which led towards the old Belgian army camp at Elsenborn and the ridge line in front of the Hohes Venn moor.

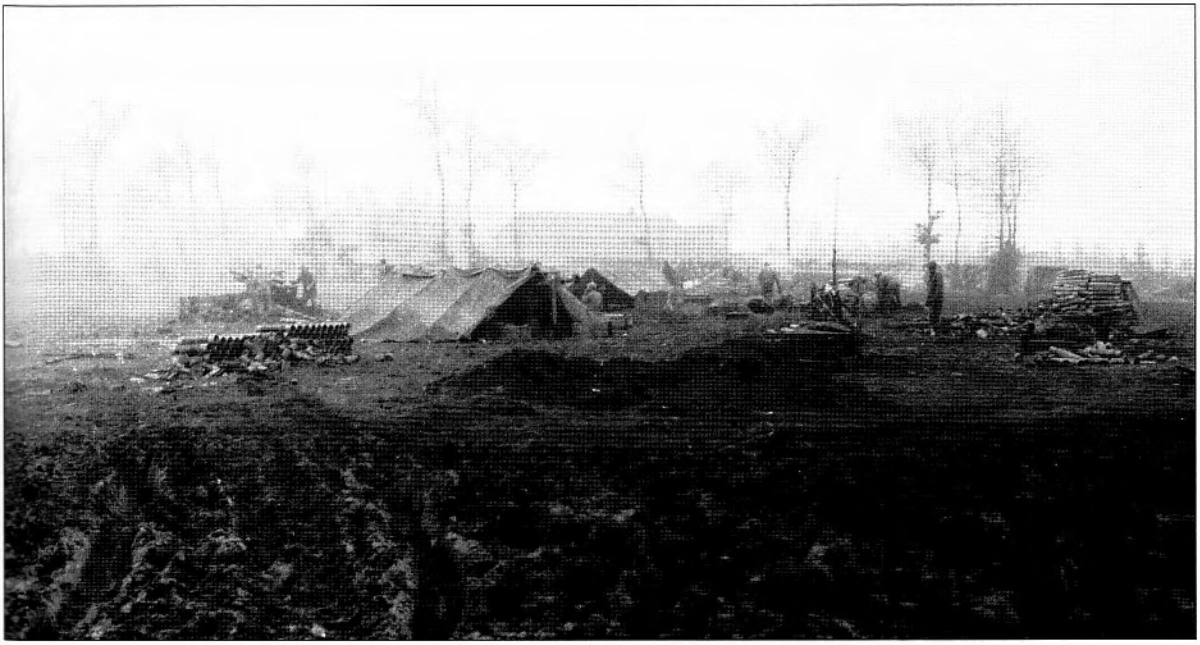
The initial assault was conducted by the 277th VGD through a wooded area covered by the 393rd Infantry of the 99th Division. The US regiment had only two battalions, its 2nd Battalion having been assigned to the aborted Roer dam attacks a few days before. These were initially deployed in a trench line on the eastern edge of woods along the International Highway. Their defensive focus was two forest trails, the Schwarzenbruch and Weissenstein trails that led to the open farm country in front of the villages. Two of the 277th VGD regiments took part in the first day's attack, the 989th Grenadier Regiment from Hollerath along the Schwarzenbruch trail, and the 990th Grenadier Regiment from Neuhof towards the Weissenstein trail. A plan for the third regiment to create a route to Rollbahn B through a southern trail towards Mürringen was abandoned due to the late arrival of the regiment, and instead both routes were redirected through the villages. The *Hitlerjugend* commander, SS-Oberführer Hugo Kraas, was concerned that the attack groups were not strong enough, and assembled a small battlegroup consisting of a battalion from the 25th SS-Panzergrenadier Regiment supported by Jagdpanzer IV tank destroyers to stiffen the attack if necessary.

Although not of the best quality, this photo shows a dramatic moment during the Battle of the Bulge as this M7 105mm HMC has been positioned along a road junction leading to the Elsenborn Ridge on 20 December 1944 with the assignment of stopping any approaching German units after Krinkelt-Rocherath had been abandoned. (NARA)

During the first day's fighting, the 989th Grenadiers managed to overrun a company of the 3/393rd Infantry in the first rush, and infiltrated through the woods between the two battalions, reaching the Jansbach stream about half way through the woods. Although the German attack had been halted well short of its objective, casualties in the 3/393rd Infantry amounted to nearly half its troops.

Further south, the attack of the 990th Grenadier Regiment began half an hour after the artillery barrage had lifted and the US infantry was well prepared. As the German infantry moved through the fog in the fields approaching the woods, they were hit by concentrated small arms and artillery fire. The divisional commander attempted to restart the attack by reinforcing it with some Jagdpanzer 38(t) but this attack also failed. In frustration, the divisional commander ordered the reserve regiment, the 991st Grenadier Regiment into action in the hope of outflanking the American positions. This attack was also stopped without any significant gains, but the 1/393rd Infantry suffered about 30 per cent casualties in the process. German casualties had been heavy, especially among the officers. Due to the poor training and poor quality of the new troops, the senior officers were forced to lead from the front and in three days of fighting, the 277th Volksgrenadier Division lost all its battalion commanders and 80 per cent of its company commanders, along with the majority of its NCOs, rendering the division unsuitable for any further offensive combat.

Frustrated by the delays, the corps commander, Gruppenführer Preiss ordered *Hitlerjugend* to commit its task force to assist in clearing the route the next day. On the US side, the 2nd Infantry Division was ordered to continue its attacks towards the Roer dams on the first day of the German offensive, with First Army commander Hodges believing the attack was only a spoiling action. But by afternoon, the divisional commander, MajGen Walter Robertson, realized that a major attack was underway and that it was imperative that the flank be secured. He began

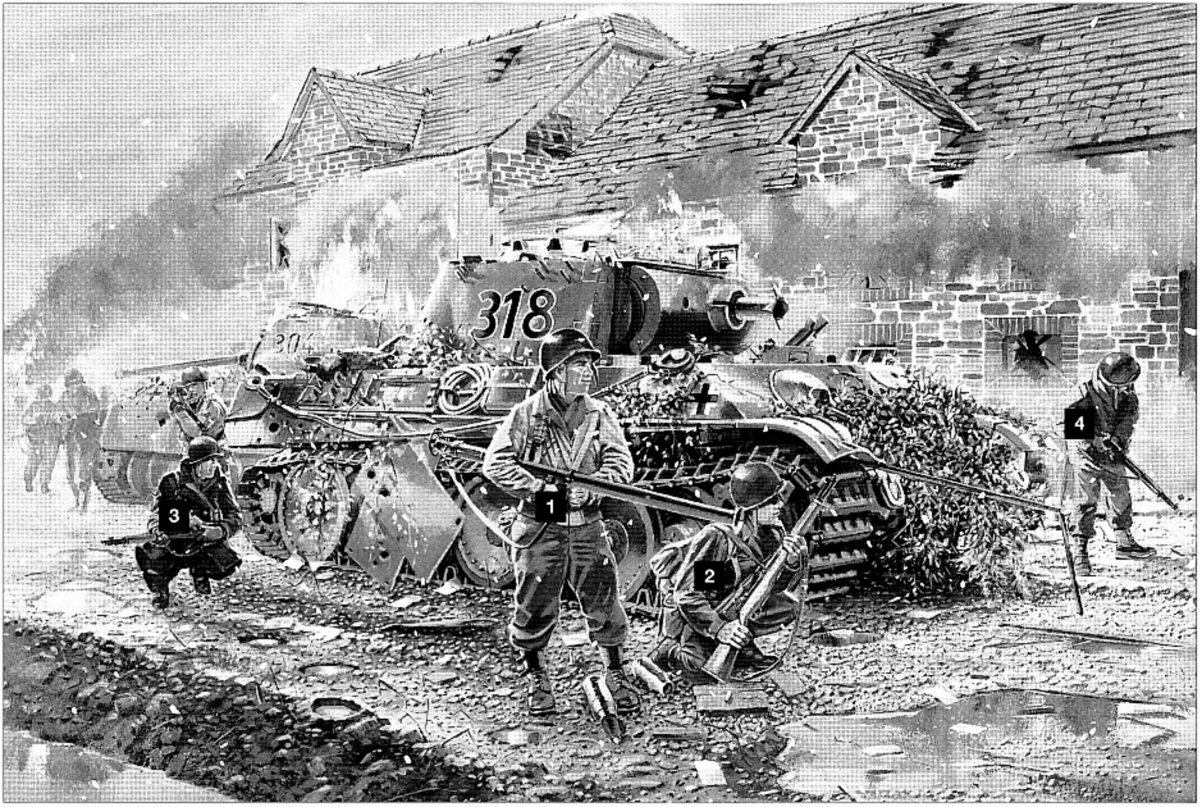


Artillery played a vital role in the defense of Krinkelt-Rocherath, and as the battle reached its peak, eight US artillery battalions took part, firing nearly 30,000 rounds during the fighting. This is the 38th Field Artillery Battalion, 2nd Infantry Division on the Elsenborn Ridge on 20 December. (NARA)

to redeploy units to reinforce Elsenborn Ridge. The 3/23rd Infantry was alerted to move to Krinkelt on 16 December and arrived in the late afternoon, deploying at the edge of woods where the two main trails emerged.

In the early morning hours of 17 December, the commander of the 3/393rd Infantry ordered a counterattack down the Schwarzenbruch trail. In the meantime, the Panzer reinforcements had reached 989th Grenadier Regiment. The two attacks were launched in the early morning and careened into one another. Even though a pair of German tank destroyers were damaged by bazooka fire, the weaker American attack was halted. Under pressure, the US battalion withdrew to the western forest edge towards a roadblock covered by a newly arrived company from the 3/23rd Infantry and a pair of M4 tanks. The neighboring 1/393rd Infantry was ordered to withdraw at 1100hrs to prevent it from being cut off by Volksgrenadiers who continued to move forward through the gap between the two battalions in the woods. The continuing attack by the battalion from the 25th SS-Panzergrenadier Regiment along the Schwarzenbruch trail suffered heavy casualties on encountering the fresh 3/23rd Infantry, but the arrival of the tank destroyers settled the matter and overwhelmed the American positions. On reaching the edge of the woods, the Panzers came under fire from two M4 tanks of the 741st Tank Battalion, but both US tanks were quickly knocked out. By the end of the day, the Panzergrenadier battalion had lost so many officers in the intense fighting that "companies were being commanded by sergeants". Shortly before noon, Kraas, the 12th SS-Panzer Division commander, decided to commit a battalion of Panther tanks, the remainder of the Panzergrenadier regiment and an assault gun battalion to reinforce the attack, hoping to reinvigorate the stalled and badly delayed advance.

By dusk on 17 December, the 989th Grenadier Regiment of 277th Volksgrenadier Division had finally pushed out of the woods and the stalled 990th Grenadier Regiment was ordered to withdraw from its



PANZER GRAVEYARD – 2ND INFANTRY DIVISION VS. 12TH SS-PANZER DIVISION IN KRINKELT, 18 DECEMBER 1944
(pages 38–39)

In his impatience to get his division back on schedule, the commander of the 12th SS-Panzer Division *Hitlerjugend*, General Kraas decided to commit his Panzer regiment to help rout out the American infantry in the streets of Krinkelt. The town was shrouded in fog and icy rain, and the green GIs of the recently arrived 99th "Battlin' Babes" Division were intermixed with the hardened veterans of the 2nd Infantry Division. The twin villages of Krinkelt and Rocherath were typical of farm communities in this rural region, with sturdy buildings made of stone. They proved to be ideal defensive positions for the US infantry. Most of the German Panzergrenadiers who were supposed to accompany the tanks into the town were stripped away from the Panzers by small arms fire before they reached the village. The Panther tanks blundered down the narrow streets, nearly blind, and with no infantry support. Although it was probably the best tank of World War II, the Panther tank was not suited for urban warfare. Its sides and rear could be penetrated by the unreliable bazooka rocket launchers used by the US infantry, and the Panzers were mercilessly hunted by US anti-tank teams all day long. The bazooka gunner seen here (1) **would operate as part of a team with the other infantrymen providing cover against the small number of German infantry who made it through the gauntlet of fire at the edge of town. The bazooka teams were supported by a number of US medium tanks and M10 tank destroyers, and the damage to this Panther's gun barrel suggests it was hit by a high velocity anti-tank round, not a bazooka. The tank shown here was the most modern version of the series, the Panther Ausf. G and was knocked out and burned on the street opposite the village church. It is painted in the usual German three-color camouflage scheme, which at this time was a base coat of red lead primer with a pattern of dark yellow and dark olive green. The markings on this tank are also fairly typical and include a three digit tactical number with the first digit identifying the company and the second the platoon. The German national insignia was not prominent. The GIs display the usual motley assortment of autumn battledress found in December 1944. The US Army was not well prepared for the winter weather, and issued the troops a variety of winter clothing. The most practical was the Model 1943 field jacket** (2)**, which was designed to be worn with layers of sweaters and other clothing for added warmth. But this was not available in sufficient quantities, and so many GIs were issued inferior alternatives, including the outdated and cumbersome Model 1942 wool Melton overcoat** (3)**. The overcoat was a particularly poor choice in the early December weather as it tended to absorb the cold rain common during the first days of the battle, and once wet, it offered little warmth when freezing temperatures returned in the evening. Some GIs also were issued the older Mackinaw jacket** (4)**, but these were not as common as the overcoat. The standard infantry weapon was the M1 Garand rifle, and this was supplemented by the squad automatic weapon, the BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle).
(Howard Gerrard)**

fruitless attack and fall in behind it. Frustrated by the poor performance of the infantry in breaking through the woods, Kraas ordered his SS Panzergrenadiers to continue the attack through the night.

As the remnants of the 3/23rd Infantry and 3/393rd Infantry were pulling back from the forest line, about 600 men of Lieutenant Colonel William McKinley's 1/9th Infantry, 2nd Infantry Division had been moved behind them and set up defensive positions near the Lausdell crossroads on the outskirts of Rocherath. The crossroads covered the trails leading into the northern end of Rocherath from the woods. The battalion had suffered nearly 50 per cent casualties in several days of fighting at Wahlerscheid in the Roer Dams operation, and even after Co. K, 3/9th Infantry was added, the battalion was still under-strength. McKinley, the grandson and namesake of the former US president, organized bazooka teams and had his troops lay anti-tank mines along the road.

The first German probe by four Jagdpanzer IV tank destroyers and infantry exited the woods after dark in the midst of a snow squall, and they evaded the Lausdell roadblock, reaching the town square in Krinkelt. A confused fight began with a handful of M4 medium tanks and M10 tank destroyers, and house-to-house fighting erupted between the Panzergrenadiers and GIs.

Subsequent German columns were brought under fire by American artillery, directed by McKinley's units at the crossroads. But in the dark and fog, some German units continued to infiltrate past the defenses into the villages. Confused fighting engulfed Lausdell but the US infantry disabled a number of German armored vehicles with bazookas and chains of mines pulled in front of advancing German columns. The German commander reinforced his spearhead and launched a concerted attack against the crossroads at 2230hrs. The Lausdell position was so vital to the American defense that all the available artillery, numbering some seven battalions with 112 howitzers, was directed to break up the attack even though radio communication with McKinley's battalion had been lost. After a pulverizing artillery concentration fell on all the roads leading into Lausdell, the German attacks finally bogged down around 2315hrs. McKinley's defense of the Lausdell crossroads on 17 December allowed the 2nd Infantry Division to move its 38th Infantry Regiment into Krinkelt-Rocherath to defend the approaches to the Elsenborn Ridge. It was reinforced by companies from the 741st Tank Battalion and the 644th Tank Destroyer Battalion.

To finally overcome the American roadblock, Kraas committed the remainder of his Panzer regiment to the fray in the early morning of 18 December along with another Panzergrenadier battalion. Colonel McKinley had been ordered to withdraw back to the villages before dawn, but the Germans struck first. In the early morning drizzle and fog, Panther tanks overran the forward defenses, firing point-blank into the trenches with their guns. One infantry company called in artillery fire on its own positions, which stopped the German attack but only a dozen GIs survived the barrage. McKinley's decimated battalion held its ground, and most of the German forces bypassed the crossroads to the south and charged directly into Rocherath. McKinley's force was finally extracted at 1115 when an artillery barrage was ordered to shield it from any further attacks from the woods while a local counterattack by four

M4 tanks cleared a path into Rocherath past the Panzers. Of the original 600 men, only 217 returned to US lines. Charles B. McDonald, present at the battle as a young company commander with the 23rd Infantry and later a senior US Army historian, wrote: "for all the defenses of many other American units during the German counteroffensive, probably none exceeded and few equaled McKinley's battalion in valor and sacrifice".

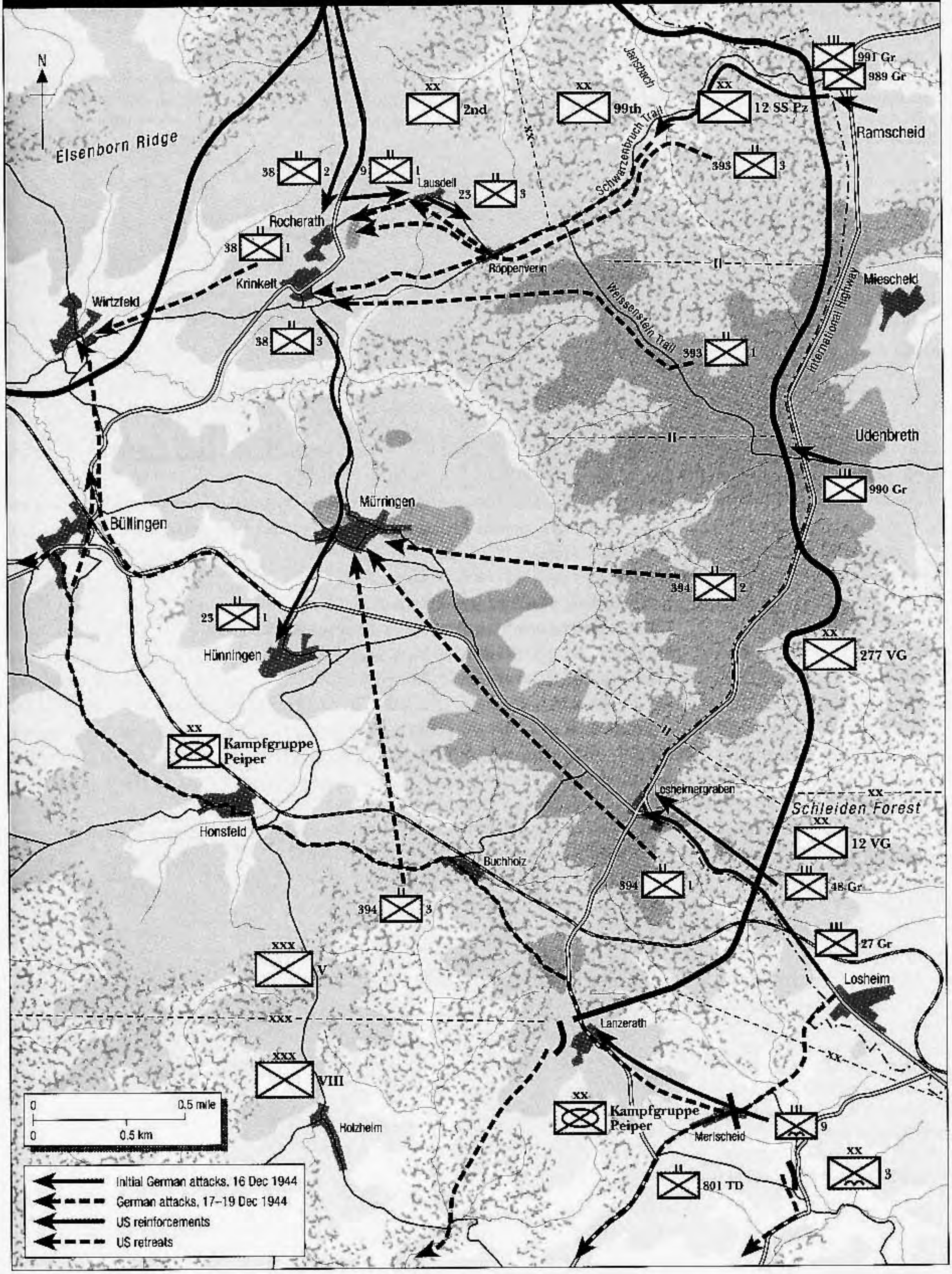
Besides the attack against the Lausdell crossroads, additional assaults backed by Panzers broke into the villages from north and south. During the course of the day, the assaults were reinforced by units of the 12th Volksgrenadier Division, which had come up from the south via Mürringen. Much of the German infantry was stripped away by artillery and small arms fire. With little infantry support, the Panther tanks became involved in deadly cat-and-mouse games with US bazooka teams scurrying through the stone buildings in the villages. A German tank commander later described the town as a "Panzer graveyard". House-to-house fighting continued inside the villages for most of the day, but at nightfall, Krinkelt and Rocherath were still in American hands, with pockets of German infantry and Panzers at the edge of the villages.

By the evening of 18 December, both sides were reassessing their options. Sepp Dietrich, realizing that he was badly behind schedule, suggested to Preiss, that he disengage from Krinkelt-Rocherath and move *Hitlerjugend* via the southern routes. Preiss was unwilling to do so, as Rollbahn C and D already went through Büllingen to the south. This would lead to all four columns being funneled through a very narrow corridor and his northern column needed to get on to the Elsenborn Ridge. As a compromise, Preiss agreed to pull out *Hitlerjugend* and to substitute the 3rd Panzergrenadier Division to continue the attack on to the Elsenborn Ridge once Krinkelt and Rocherath were finally cleared. At roughly the same time, MajGen Robertson had concluded that the defense of Krinkelt-Rocherath had become untenable and it was time to withdraw to the Elsenborn Ridge.

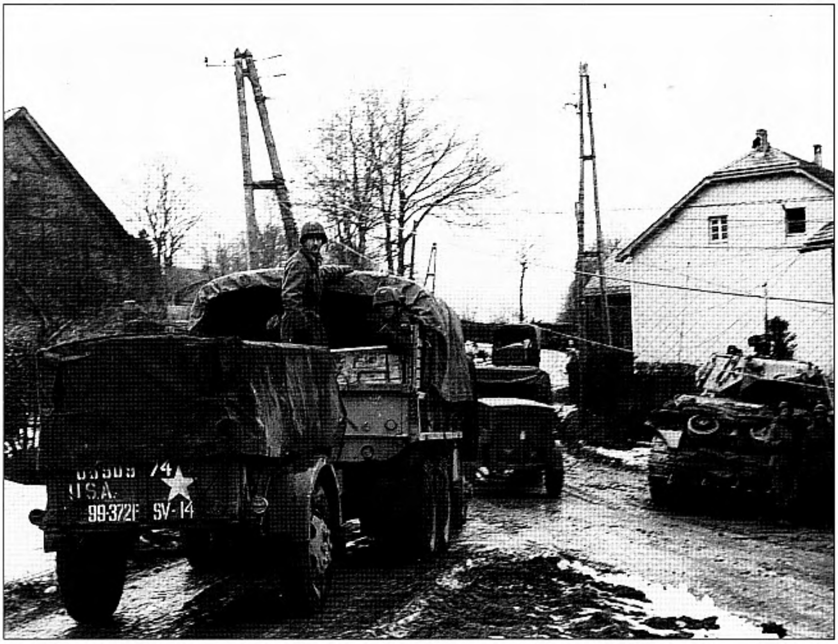
The German infantry, with tank support, resumed their attacks in the villages the following morning but were greeted with heavy fire from eight field artillery battalions. Around 1345hrs, Robertson radioed his commanders in the Twin Villages and told them that the withdrawal would begin after nightfall at 1730 with the units from the northern edge of Rocherath pulling out first, and gradually withdrawing the units from the center and the southern edge of Krinkelt. The withdrawal would be to the next largest town to the west, Wirtzfeld. The rearguard consisted of a small number of M4 tanks and M10 tank destroyers and was successfully executed in the dark.

The fighting for Krinkelt-Rocherath had effectively blocked the 12th SS-Panzer Div. *Hitlerjugend* for three entire days. Although the German plans had expected *Hitlerjugend* to reach the Meuse on the second day, they had barely reached a depth of ten kilometers. The defense of the Twin Villages enabled the V Corps to build up an impregnable defense along the Elsenborn Ridge, thereby denying the Germans the shortest route to the Meuse. A later US study concluded that *Hitlerjugend* lost 111 tanks, assault guns and other armored vehicles in the fighting, which is an exaggeration. German records are far from complete and it would appear that about 60 AFVs were knocked out of

INITIAL ATTACKS OF 6TH PANZER ARMY


N
Elsenborn Ridge
XX 2nd
XX 99th
Jansbach
XX 12 SS Pz
III 991 Gr
III 989 Gr
Ramscheid
Schwarzenbruch Trail
393 3
38 2
9 1
Lausdell
23 3
Rocherath
38 1
Röppenvenn
Krinkelt
Wirtzfeld
38 3
Weissenstein Trail
393 1
International Highway
Miescheld
Udenbreth
990 Gr
Mürringen
Büllingen
394 2
23 1
Hünningen
XX 277 VG
Kampfgruppe Peiper
Honsfeld
Buchholz
Losheimergraben
Schleiden Forest
XX 12 VG
394 1
48 Gr
394 3
27 Gr
Losheim
XXX V
XXX VIII
Lanzerath
Kampfgruppe Peiper
Merlscheid
9
801 TD
XX 3
Holzheim
0 0.5 mile
0 0.5 km
Initial German attacks, 16 Dec 1944
German attacks, 17–19 Dec 1944
US reinforcements
US retreats

Trucks of the 372nd Field Artillery Battalion, 99th Infantry Division withdraw through a junction at Wirtzfeld on 17 December as *Hitlerjugend* attacks neighboring Rocherath. The crossroads is covered by a M10 from the 644th Tank Destroyer Battalion. The M10s from this unit repulsed a probe by Kampfgruppe Peiper that day along a neighboring road.



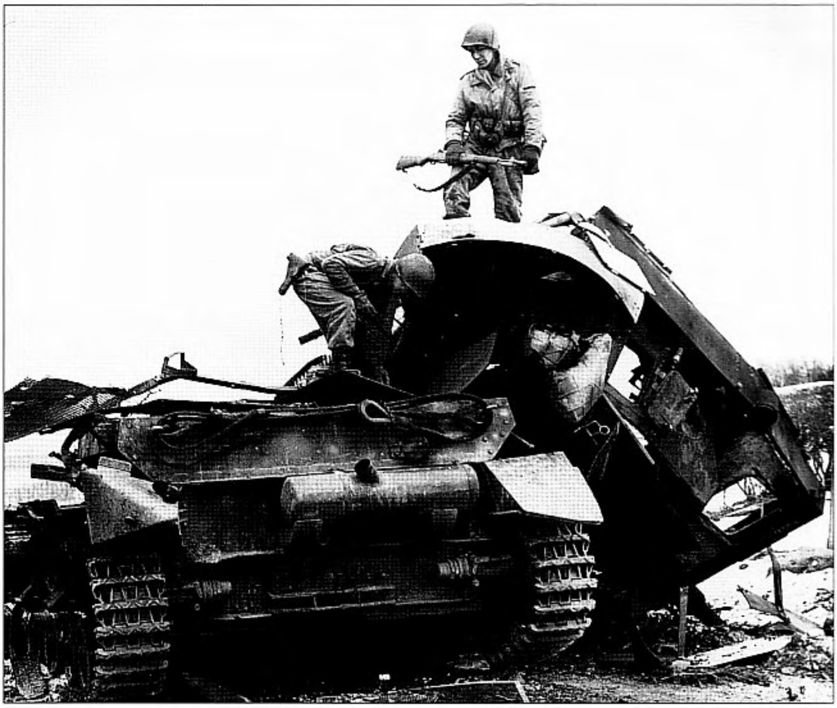
which 31 tanks and assault guns and 14 light armored vehicles were total losses. But time was far more precious than hardware, and the loss was unredeemable.

Opening Rollbahn C and D – Losheimergraben and Buchholz Station

Of all the road networks in the Sixth Army sector, none were more important than those leading west out of Losheim. Originally, the plan called for a regiment of the 277th Volksgrenadier Div. to open a route from Udenbreth to Mürringen for *Hitlerjugend* but its late arrival made this impossible. Instead, Losheim became the start point of both Rollbahns C and D, and so, in theory, the start points of the heavy battle

While other elements of the 2nd Division were engaged in the savage fighting in Krinkelt-Rocherath, the 2nd Battalion, 9th Infantry was shifted from the "Heartbreak Crossroads" near Wahlerscheid to cover the gap west of Krinkelt near Wirtzfeld. Here the unit is seen on 20 December while in transit on the Elsenborn Ridge. (NARA)

During the fighting in Büllingen on 17 December, the spearhead of Kampfgruppe Peiper, a company of PzKpfw IV tanks led by SS-Obersturmführer Werner Sternebeck became disoriented and headed out of town north instead of west towards Witrzfeld. About a mile out of town the two lead Panzers were knocked out by some M10 3in. GMC of the 644th Tank Destroyer Battalion. (NARA)



groups of both the 1st SS-Panzer and 12th SS-Panzer Divisions. In the event, *Hitlerjugend* became bogged down in fighting at Krinkelt-Rocherath, and later at Dom Bütgenbach, and so its planned Panzer drive along Rollbahn C never materialized.

The German assault to capture this road-net was led by the 12th Volksgrenadier Division from Losheim along the International Highway where it met Losheimergraben and the route to Büllingen. The division attacked with two regiments, 27th Grenadier Regiment up the International Highway, and 48th Grenadier Regiment through the Schleiden forest. US forces in this region consisted of the 394th Infantry Regiment, 99th Division with its three battalions stretched out in a line on the eastern side of the International Highway from Weissenstein to the Buchholz railroad line, a distance of about three miles.

The attack by the 48th Grenadier Regiment went badly when one of its battalions stumbled into the opening barrages, suffering 60 per cent casualties. As a result attacks were weakest in the northern sector against 2/394th Infantry. The attack along the key route out of Losheim progressed more smoothly and by afternoon had overrun one company of the 1/394th Infantry and inflicted heavy casualties on the others. The intensity of these attacks decreased when trouble to the south forced the 27th Grenadier Regiment commander to redirect a battalion in this direction.

Buchholz rail station, the southernmost position of the 99th Division was held by the 3/394th Infantry. This company was not deployed in a trench line like its two northern neighbors, but left in an assembly area around the station to serve as a mobile reserve for the division. Shortly after the initial barrage, a battalion of 27th Grenadier Regiment attempted to use the cover of the early morning ground fog to rush the station. They were caught in the open and withdrew with serious casualties. Around 1100hrs reinforcements arrived but failed to overcome the US positions. The US battalion commander realized the precariousness of his position, and with regimental consent, withdrew his unit back towards a more defensible position near Losheimergraben after dusk, leaving two platoons behind at Buchholz station as a security force. By evening, the 27th Grenadier Regiment had patrols on the fringes of the American positions in front of Losheimergraben.

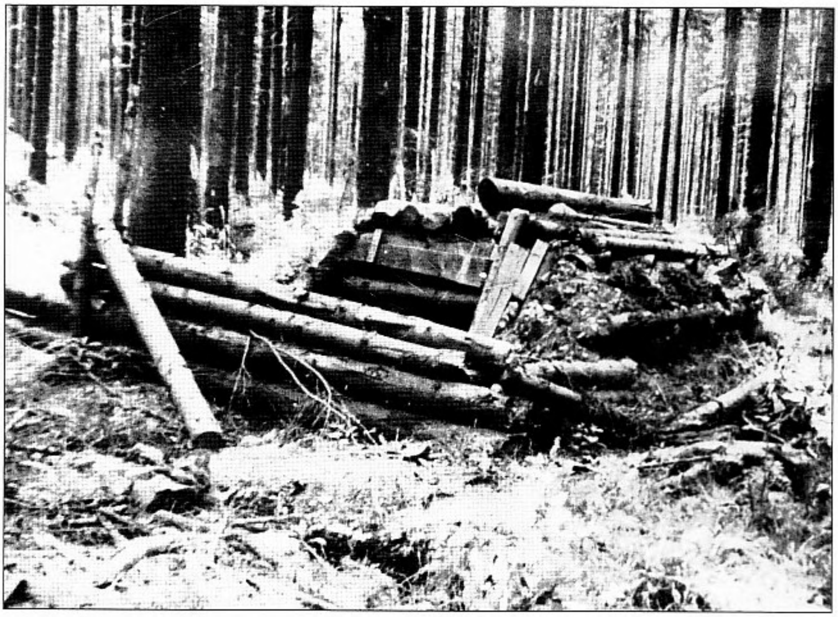
After dark, the 12th VGD officers were visited by the irate 1st SS-Panzer Corps commander who insisted that they take Losheimergraben in a dawn attack. Preceded by artillery strikes, their attacks were renewed before dawn. Intense fighting enveloped the town and surrounding woods, and though the 1/394th Infantry positions held, the battalion suffered serious casualties. By late morning, the US regimental commander decided to withdraw from the woods and set up new defensive positions on the hills east of Mürringen. The German attack failed in part because the promised support from the division's StuG III assault guns did not materialize when they got stuck in the massive traffic jam behind the lines. When the attacks on the town resumed with armored support at 1300 there was hardly any resistance except for a small rearguard. A battalion of 48th Grenadier Regiment began racing up the highway towards Mürringen but ran into elements of the 2/394th Infantry that had not yet received instructions to withdraw. The last American rearguard in the customs houses in Losheimergraben did not surrender until 1500hrs.

While the fight was going on in Losheimergraben, reinforcements in the form of the 1/23rd Infantry from the 2nd Infantry Division moved into the town of Hünningen before dawn on 17 December. They covered the afternoon withdrawal and prevented the 12th VGD from emerging from the woods. A hasty defense was set up in the neighboring village of Mürringen by the remnants of the 394th Infantry, but a night attack supported by ten StuG III assault guns captured the town around midnight. One of the routes was finally open, two days late.

Rollbahn E – Krewinkel and Lanzerath

The 3rd Fallschirmjäger Division was assigned the task of opening the southernmost corridor for the 1st SS-Panzer Corps. This should have been the easiest of the breakthroughs due to the extreme imbalance between German and US forces. The objective was the corps boundary, which was screened by nothing more than the 14th Cavalry Group. Normally, a gap this size would be assigned to an entire infantry division, not to a unit with a deployable strength roughly that of a single infantry battalion. Furthermore, the cavalry commander, Colonel Mark Devine decided to keep one of his two squadrons in reserve almost 20 miles behind the front. A defensive plan had been developed for the Losheim Gap when the 2nd Infantry Division had been responsible for the sector earlier in the month, which consisted of a withdrawal of the forward outposts to the Manderfeld ridge, pre-registered artillery strikes forward of these defenses, and a counterattack from the Schnee Eifel. When the 106th Division took over this sector on 11 December, this plan went into limbo in spite of the efforts of the cavalry. In contrast to the conditions in the V Corps sector to the north, with forests along the frontier, this sector consisted of open farmland.

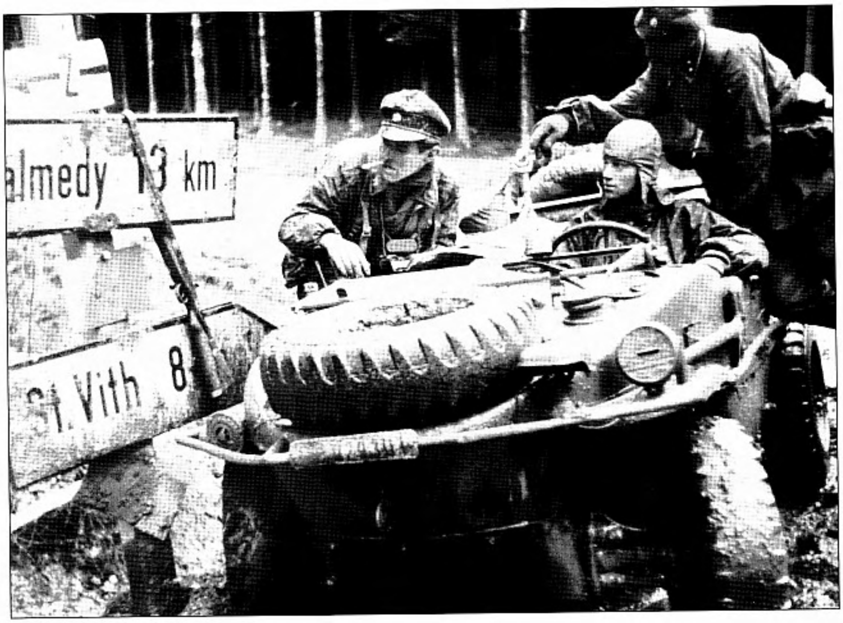
The 99th Division's rifle squads built log reinforced shelters along the front line during November 1944, usually consisting of a two-man fighting trench, and a large but shallower bunker for sleeping like this one near Losheimergraben. These substantially reduced casualties from the initial artillery barrage of 16 December. (MHI)



Generalmajor Wadehn's badly depleted 3rd Fallschirmjäger Division was deployed with both available regiments up front. The 9th Fallschirmjäger Regiment was assigned to seize the small village of Lanzerath, while the 5th Fallschirmjäger Regiment was assigned the capture of Krewinkel, the nominal start point of Rollbahn E.

Defense of Lanzerath was nominally in the hands of a towed 3in. anti-tank gun platoon attached to the 14th Cavalry Group. However, once the initial barrage lifted, the platoon evacuated the village when it saw the German paratroopers marching down the road towards the town. The only other US force in the area was an understrength

The task of clearing the way into the Losheim Gap for the 1st SS-Panzer Corps was assigned to the 12th Volksgrenadier Division, commanded by Generalmajor Gerhard Engel seen here (right) conversing with the head of Army Group B, Walther Model. (MHI)



Among the most famous of the photos taken by an anonymous German military cameraman is this shot of a Waffen-SS Schwimmwagen pulled up to the road signs at the Kaiserbaracke crossroads leading towards Poteau on 18 December 1944. Often misidentified as Jochen Peiper, it is in fact a team from Fast Gruppe Knittel with SS-Unterscharführer Ochsner to the left and SS-Oberscharführer Persin behind the driver. This photo was one of those from four rolls of film later captured by the US 3rd Armored Division. (NARA)

intelligence and reconnaissance (I&R) platoon of the 1/394th Infantry under the command of Lieutenant Lyle Bouck, that served as a screening force for the southern boundary of the 99th Division. After a brief scouting foray into the village, Bouck deployed his force, now down to a squad in size, in a trench line on the edge of the woods outside Lanzerath. To the surprise of the GIs, a paratrooper battalion emerged from the village in marching order. About 100 paratroopers deployed in a skirmish line 100m in front of their line and charged across an open field. A slaughter ensued. Through the course of the day, the Germans launched two more frontal charges with equally ghastly results. Although Bouck's men held their position, most were wounded, little ammunition remained, and their machine guns had been put out of action. In the late afternoon, the German tactics changed when a veteran NCO, infuriated by the casualties, pointedly told the commander, an inexperienced rear echelon Luftwaffe staff officer, that they should outflank the American position and not continue to attack it frontally. This time the American position was quickly overwhelmed and the survivors, including Bouck, captured. Bouck's platoon was later awarded the Presidential Unit Citation and he and his men were decorated with four Distinguished Service Crosses and five Silver Stars making it the most decorated unit of the war. An under-strength platoon had held off a regiment for an entire day, in turn blocking the advance of 1st SS-Panzer Division.

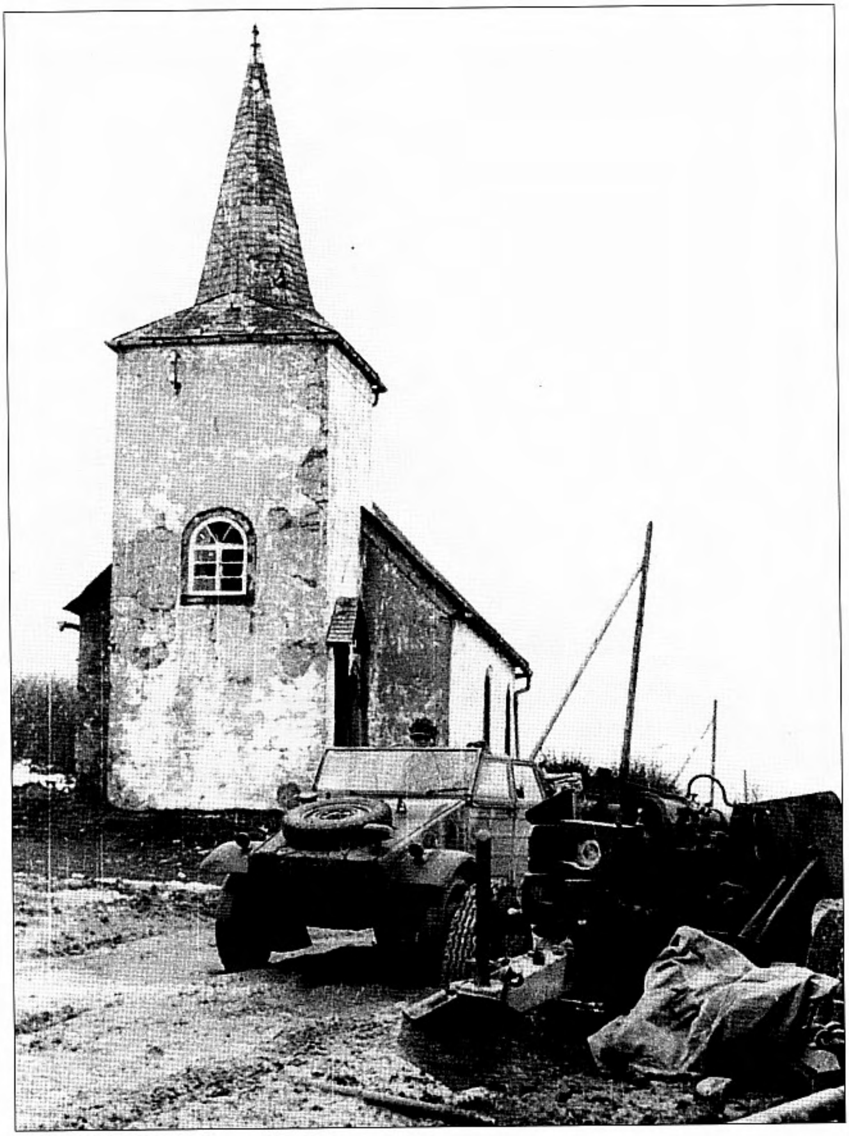
The defense of Krewinkel was more short-lived. The village was held by a platoon from C Troop, 18th Cavalry Squadron in a series of foxholes. As at Lanzerath, the 5th Fallschirmjäger Regiment attacked frontally resulting in heavy casualties. However, the American positions were so thin that German units simply continued their march westward past the defenses. The 14th Cavalry Group commander, Colonel Mark Devine, asked the 106th Division to send reinforcements as per the earlier defensive plan, but the 106th Division, largely unaware of the plan, refused. In the late morning Devine ordered his men to withdraw

An SdKfz 234/1 eight-wheel reconnaissance armored car of Kampfgruppe Knittel is seen moving forward with SS troops on its rear deck during the fighting on 18 December. (NARA)

to Manderfeld. The cavalry began withdrawing from Krewinkel at 1100, as did neighboring garrisons in Abst and Weckerath. The garrison at Roth was overrun and that in Kobsheid had to wait until dark to withdraw. Reinforcements from the 32nd Cavalry Squadron arrived near Manderfeld in the late afternoon, but by this stage, German troops were already pouring past. The surviving elements from the 18th Cavalry abandoned Manderfeld around 1600, heading for the squadron headquarters at Holzheim. For all intents and purposes, Rollbahn E and the Losheim Gap were wide open with no appreciable American defenses remaining.

The Schnee Eifel and the 106th Division

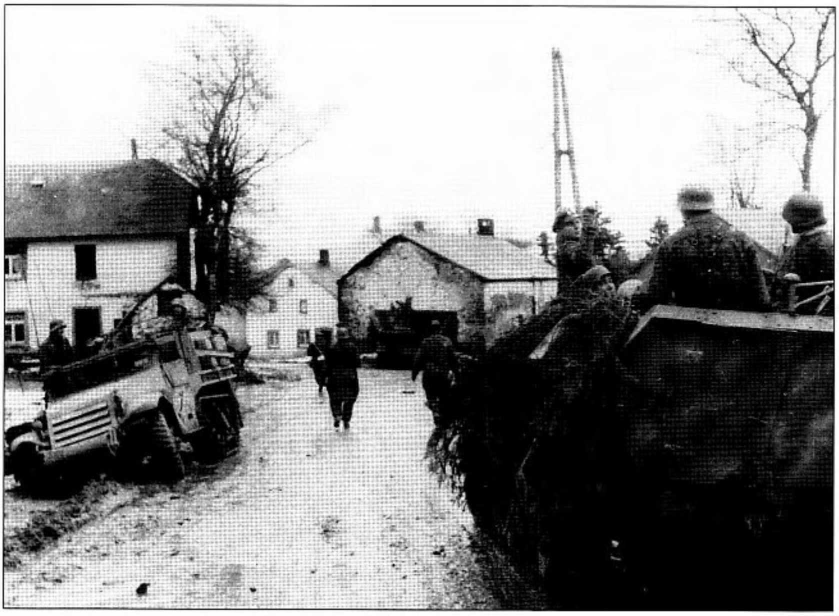
Although not in the path of the 6th Panzer Army, the fate of the 106th Division and St Vith are inextricably linked to the fate of the German Ardennes offensive in the northern sector. The 106th Division held a frontline about 15 miles wide with the 14th Cavalry Group acting as a screening force to its north. Two of its regiments, the 422nd and 423rd Infantry, were positioned in a vulnerable salient on the Schnee Eifel, a wooded ridgeline protruding off the Eifel plateau. The previous tenants, the 2nd Infantry Division felt the position was poorly situated for defense and in the event of an attack, planned to withdraw off the Schnee Eifel to a more defensible line along the Auw-Bleialf ridge, freeing up a regiment to deal with the weak cavalry defense of the Losheim Gap. Although these plans were outlined to the 106th Division commander, Major General Alan Jones, his staff had been in position for too short a period of time to appreciate their predicament. The area forward of the two regiments was very suitable for defense since it consisted of rugged forest with no significant roads. But it was flanked on either side by two good roads, from Roth to Auw, and Sellerich to Bleialf.



A Kubelwagen utility vehicle of 1st SS-Panzer Div. passes a disabled US 3in. anti-tank gun of the 820th Tank Destroyer Battalion, knocked out in the fighting for the Losheim Gap in the hamlet of Merlscheid on 18 December 1944 with the village church in the background. (NARA)

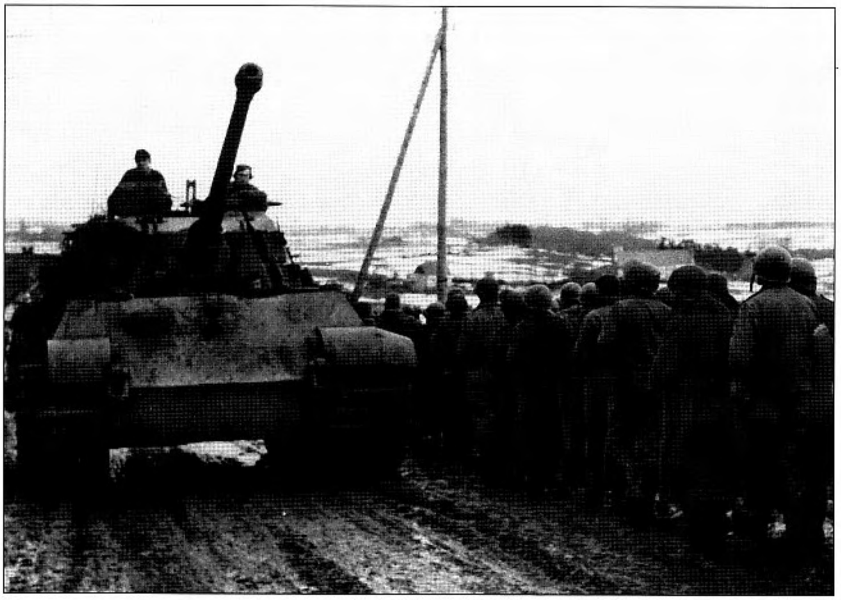
Recognizing the weakness of his infantry divisions, Manteuffel realized that 5th Panzer Army needed sound tactics to break through. Before the offensive, German patrols discovered that the inexperienced 106th Division had arrived on 10 December. Contrary to Hitler's orders, Manteuffel permitted patrols that discovered a 2km gap to the north between the weak 14th Cavalry positions in Roth and Weckerath. He decided that the American positions on the Schnee Eifel were so precarious that a single division could by-pass them, with the main thrust directed through the Losheim Gap to the north. The task was assigned to the 18th Volksgrenadier Division, which had been created from the remains of the 18th Luftwaffe Field Division destroyed in the Mons pocket in Belgium in September. While neither particularly experienced nor well trained, it had suffered few losses during its occupation duty at the front in the autumn. Its northern thrust through Roth would include two of its infantry regiments, the divisional artillery, and a supporting assault gun brigade, while its southern battlegroup had only a single infantry regiment

German Panzergrenadiers of 1st SS-Panzer Division move through Honsfeld on 17 December after Kampfgruppe Peiper captured the town. To the right is an SdKfz 251 Ausf. D, the standard German infantry half-track, while to the left is a captured example of its American counterpart, the M3 half-track. The vehicle in the background is a Mobelwagen 37mm anti-aircraft vehicle, one of two of Flak Kompanie 10/SS-Pz.Regt.1/1.SS-Pz.Div. knocked out during the fighting by a US anti-tank gun. (NARA)



supported by a self-propelled artillery battalion. The positions directly in front of the Schnee Eifel were held by only a replacement battalion since Manteuffel expected an American counterattack eastward was unlikely. The US 106th Division's third regiment, the 424th Infantry, south of the Schnee Eifel was the target of the 62nd Volksgrenadier Division.

As mentioned earlier, the tactics in the 5th Panzer Army sector for the initial assault differed significantly from those in the neighboring 6th Panzer Army sector and were based on infiltration prior to the main artillery barrage. As a result, the German infantry began moving in the dark at 0400hrs to infiltrate past the scattered defenses in the Losheim Gap. The morning was overcast with ground fog and rain that further aided this plan. Manteuffel firmly instructed his infantry officers that their

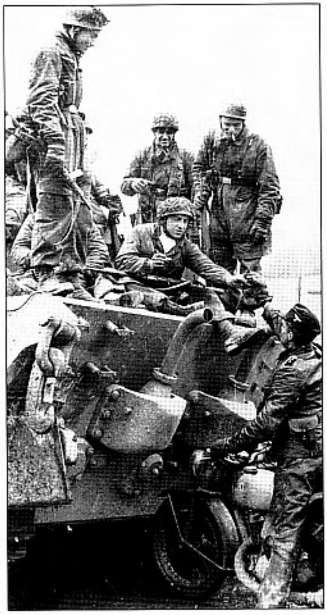


A Kingtiger drives past US prisoners, mostly from the 99th Division, captured during the fighting on 17 December. The village of Merlscheid lies in the background and the Kingtiger is on its way towards Lanzerath, the start point for Kampfgruppe Peiper. (NARA) men were to cut all communication wire that they found to isolate the forward US positions.

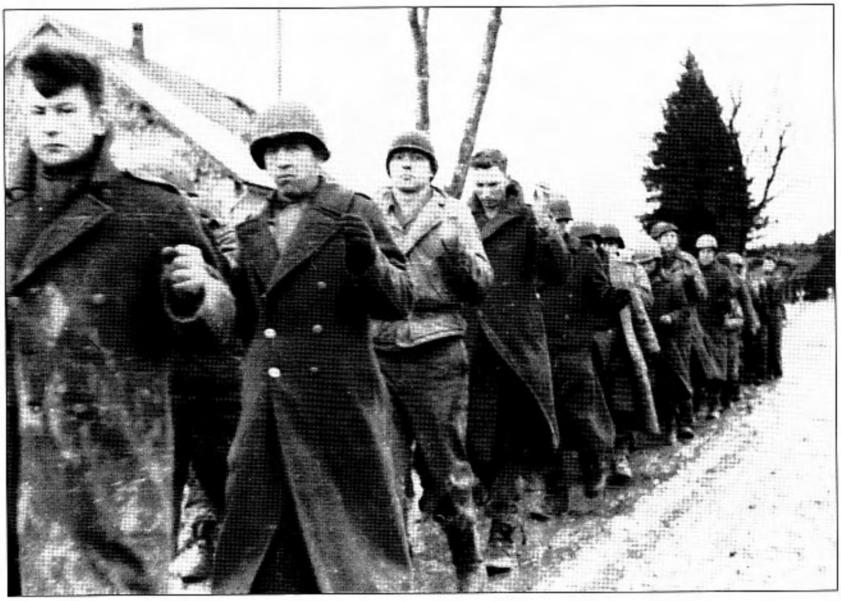
The main assault force in the northern sector made it past the cavalry outposts in Roth and Weckerath without being detected, reaching the outskirts of Auw before dawn. German artillery did not begin its fire missions until 0830 against the towns held by the American cavalry, and by this time, German troops had already begun their assaults. The 14th Cavalry garrisons at Roth and Kobscheid surrendered in the late afternoon. The remnants of the 14th Cavalry further to the north were given permission by the 106th Division to withdraw to a ridgeline from Andler to Holzheim in the late afternoon. The remaining resistance in this sector came from the 592nd Field Artillery Battalion, which was subjected to a direct attack by Sturmgeschütz III assault guns. The attack was stopped by point blank howitzer fire, but by nightfall the artillery were in a precarious position.

On the right flank, the first 106th Division unit to come under heavy attack was the isolated 424th Infantry. Its foxholes on the high ground near Heckhuscheid were attacked by the 62nd VGD and Panzergrenadiers of the 116th Panzer Division. The first attack made little progress, but another attack up the Habscheid road began to isolate the 424th Infantry from the other two regiments on the Schnee Eifel. Casualties in the 424th Infantry were modest, but casualties in the inexperienced 62nd VGD had been heavy, especially amongst the officers. The neighboring regiment of the 18th VGD had similar experiences, fighting its way into Bleialf by late in the day, but at significant cost.

Manteuffel's infiltration tactics had been moderately successful. By nightfall the attack had made progress even if not as fast as hoped. The northern assault groups of the 18th VGD held positions near Auw behind the northern flank of the 106th Division as well as the Roth-Kobscheid area. On the southern side of the Schnee Eifel, the penetration was not as deep, but significant inroads had been made along the Bleialf road. Manteuffel prodded the commanders to complete their missions even if it took all night.



Peiper was infuriated by the failure of the 3rd Fallschirmjäger Division's to seize Honsfeld on 17 December 1944 and appropriated a battalion of paratroopers for his column. Some of these troops ended up riding on the engine deck of a King Tiger tank commanded by Oberscharführer Sowa of 501st schweres SS-Panzer Abteilung near Ligneuville on 18 December 1944 as seen here. (NARA)



LEFT **A column of US prisoners from the 99th Division trudge towards the rear between Lanzerath and Merlscheid following the fighting on 17 December 1944. This photo was one of the series taken by a German combat cameraman accompanying Fast Group Knittel along Rollbahn D. (NARA)**

RIGHT **During the fighting on 18 December in the Losheim Gap, Kampfgruppe Hansen overwhelmed a column from the 14th Cavalry Group that was moving on the road between Recht and Poteau. This shows two of the M8 armored cars that were abandoned, both from C Troop, 18th Cavalry Squadron. (NARA)**

The commander of Fast Group Knittel was Sturmbannführer Gustav Knittel, commander of the 1st SS-Panzer Reconnaissance Battalion. He is seen here (right) consulting a map with the chief of his headquarters company, Heinrich Goltz (left) while near La Vaux-Richard on 18 December 1944 on the approaches to La Gleize. (NARA)

Since the 106th Division had exhausted its reserves due to its overly extended front, the VIII Corps commander, MajGen Middleton, allotted Combat Command B (CCB) of the 9th Armored Division near Faymonville to the division that evening. Recognizing the gravity of the situation, Bradley in turn committed the 7th Armored Division to Middleton's beleaguered corps. That evening, Middleton telephoned Jones and the ensuing conversation was one of the most controversial of the campaign. Middleton promised to send the CCB of the 7th Armored Division to St Vith but Jones misunderstood that it would arrive by dawn on 18 December. Since it was facing a road march from the Netherlands along roads clogged with retreating troops and civilians, this was impossible. While Middleton and Jones were discussing future plans for the two regiments exposed on the Schnee Eifel, a switchboard operator accidentally disconnected the line and reconnected it moments later with unfortunate consequences. Middleton thought Jones understood that he wanted him to withdraw his two regiments off the Schnee Eifel, while Jones thought that his plans to leave the two regiments in place had been approved. As a result of all this confusion, Jones and his staff decided to deploy the CCB/9th Armored to the southern flank to reinforce the isolated 424th Infantry, and to use CCB/7th Armored Division to counterattack against the German penetration in the Losheim Gap thereby defending the two regiments on the Schnee Eifel.

After the 14th Cavalry Group column was ambushed, a German *Kriegsberichter* camera team staged a number of scenes near the burning vehicles. These are some of the only surviving images of the Battle of the Bulge from the German perspective, as the film later fell into US hands. This shows an often photographed SS-Rottenführer in a dramatic pose alongside a disabled M2A1 half-track. (NARA)

The CCB/9th Armored Division moved through St Vith around dawn with the intention of deploying near Winterspelt to block the German inroads between the 424th Infantry and the Schnee Eifel. Winterspelt was already in German hands, and first contact was made on the western bank of the Our river near Elcherath when the 14th Tank Battalion collided with the 62nd VGD. During the subsequent fighting on 17 December, the 424th Infantry became separated from the 28th Division to its south, and the intervention of CCB/9th Armored Div. was not enough to bridge the gap to the Schnee Eifel. By early evening, Jones gave the 424th Infantry permission to withdraw west and set up defensive positions along the Our river with the CCB/9th Armored Div. covering the area towards St Vith.

The situation on the Schnee Eifel had become dangerous during the night of 16/17 December as the two battle groups of the 18th VGD continued their push around the flanks of the two American regiments. On the southern flank, the town of Bleialf was hit hard at 0530hrs and was overrun shortly after dawn. This regiment, the 293rd, continued to move rapidly to the northwest against little opposition, aiming for the town of Schönberg. The US defense was further weakened by the lack of communications between Jones in St Vith and his two regimental commanders, due in no small measure to the success of the German infantry in ripping up communication wires, as well as the failure of this inexperienced unit to establish a robust radio net prior to the attack. On the northern flank, the 14th Cavalry Group's defensive efforts had evaporated by the morning of 17 December, and it began a series of uncoordinated withdrawals towards Andler and Schönberg. The northern remnants of the 14th Cavalry Group bumped into advancing columns from the 1st SS-Panzer Division. By noon, surviving elements of the 32nd Cavalry Squadron were at Wallerode on the approaches to St Vith, and the 18th Cavalry Squadron at Born, further to the northwest.

The first inkling that the two wings of the 18th VGD were about to link up behind the Schnee Eifel came in the early morning when US artillery battalions attempting to retreat near Schönberg began to run into advancing German columns. By 0900hrs the German encirclement of the two regiments of the 106th Division on the Schnee Eifel was complete, though it was by no means secure. The leading German battalions were instructed to continue to move west, and there were no efforts to establish a firm cordon around the trapped American units. The two trapped regiments set up perimeter defense and attempted to contact divisional headquarters in St Vith for further instruction. They were informed that reinforcements would attempt a breakthrough from the west on 18 December and that further supplies of ammunition would be dropped by air. Major General Jones at first believed that the imminent arrival of CCB/7th Armored Division would permit a relief of the units, and that prompt air supply would take care of their shortage of ammunition and food. As the day wore on, this seemed more and more unlikely. The call for air supply became caught up in red tape and no action was ever taken. The CCB/7th Armored Division became so entangled in traffic on its approach to St Vith that there was never any chance of it intervening on the Schnee Eifel. By the time it arrived, the fate of St Vith itself was in doubt. An order at 1445hrs to withdraw both regiments westward towards the Our river was so delayed by radio problems that it did not arrive until midnight by which time it was too late.

One of the only organized groups to escape the encirclement of the 106th Division on the Schnee Eifel was the intelligence and reconnaissance platoon of Lieutenant Ivan Long (center) from the 423rd Infantry. About 70 men from the regiment refused to surrender and reached St Vith the night of 20 December as seen here. (NARA)

Further instructions arrived at 0730 on 18 December indicating that the units should breakout towards St Vith, bypassing the heaviest German concentrations around Schönberg. The regiments destroyed non-essential equipment such as field kitchens, left the wounded with medics in regimental collection stations, and started off to the west, both regiments abreast in a column of battalions. The first contact with German forces began around 1130 when 2/423rd Infantry encountered German infantry on the main Bleialf-Schönberg road. Requesting help, two more battalions moved forward but were not able to push through. Shortly after the attacks began the divisional headquarters ordered the attack redirected towards Schönberg. During the course of the day, contact was lost between the two regiments. That night, the 423rd Infantry formed a defensive position to the southeast of Schönberg. By

Although two of the 106th Division's regiments were surrounded on the Schnee Eifel, a third, the 424th Infantry was further south and later served in the defense of St Vith. Here two soldiers of Co. C, 3/424th Infantry roll up their sleeping bags near Manhay on 28 December 1944 where the unit withdrew alongside CCB/7th Armored Division after the defense of St Vith. The "Golden Lion" divisional patch can be seen on the soldier on the right. (NARA)

The demolished rail bridge on the Malmedy-Stadkyll rail-line held up the columns following behind Kampfgruppe Peiper's spearhead. It was finally spanned by a J-Gerät bridge, which enabled trucks and other wheeled vehicles to follow. (NARA)

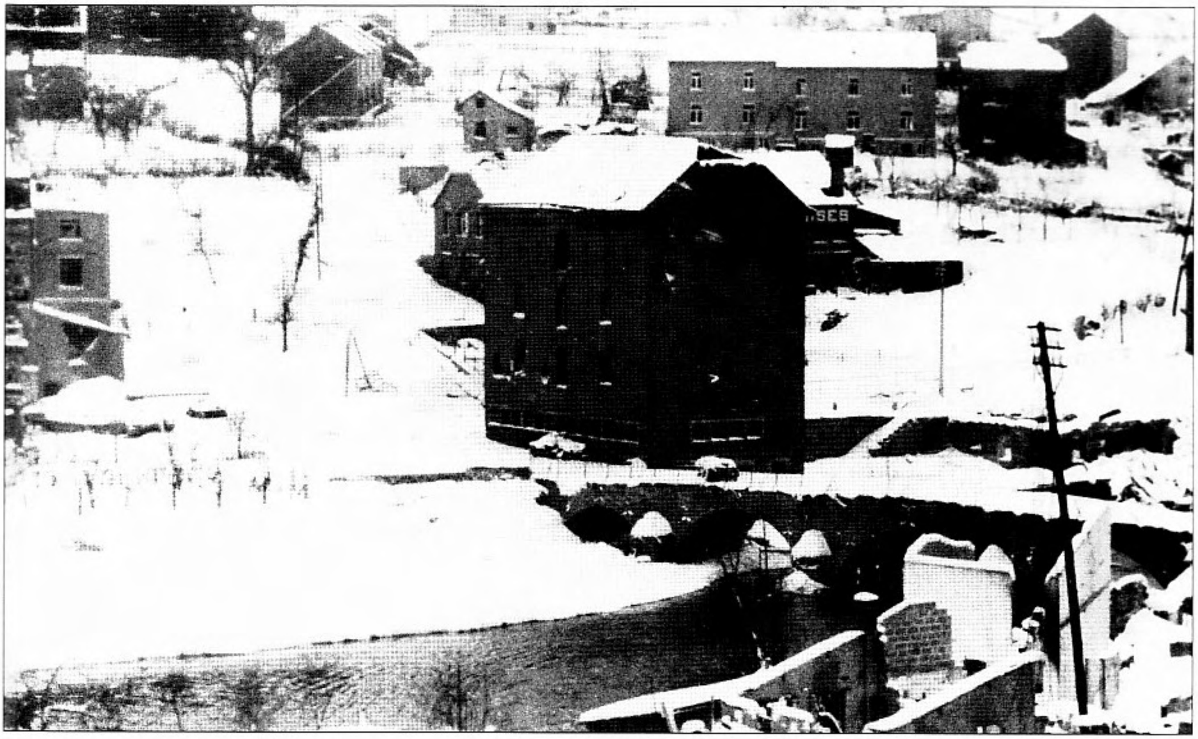
this time, the unit was out of mortar ammunition, and had little rifle ammunition. The 422nd Infantry did not make contact with the German forces during the day, and when they bivouacked that evening, they mistakenly believed they were on the outskirts of their objective of Schönberg.

The German response to the American breakout attempts was made more difficult by the enormous traffic jam around Schönberg as units flowed west. As a result, the 56th Corps commander decided to counter the Americans with heavy artillery concentrations. As the 423rd Infantry formed for its attack shortly after dawn on 19 December, it was hit hard by the German artillery, followed by an infantry assault. Two rifle companies reached the outskirts of Schönberg but were pushed back by German anti-aircraft guns. By mid-afternoon, the attacks had collapsed, and the US infantrymen were down to less than a dozen rounds per rifle. With tactical control gone, the regimental commander gave the order to surrender around 1630hrs.

The 422nd Regiment moved out on the morning of 19 December across the Bleialf–Auw road near Oberlascheid but was brought under heavy small arms fire from German infantry in the woods west of the road. The 422nd had little success in advancing any further, and around 1400, the tanks of the Führer Begleit Brigade suddenly moved down the road on their way towards St Vith. This trapped a portion of the regiment between the tanks on the road and the German infantry in the woods. Some of the regiment surrendered at 1430, and most of the rest around 1600hrs. A number of groups tried to escape but most were eventually captured over the next few days. The surrender of the two regiments of the 106th Division, over 7,000 men, was the US Army's single greatest setback of the campaign in Europe.

Command Perspectives

From the perspective of Field Marshal Model of Army Group B, the breakthrough in the northern sector had finally been accomplished by 19 December, but two days behind schedule. The configuration of the breakthrough had not conformed to the plan. The anticipated breakthrough along the northern routes on the Elsenborn Ridge had been

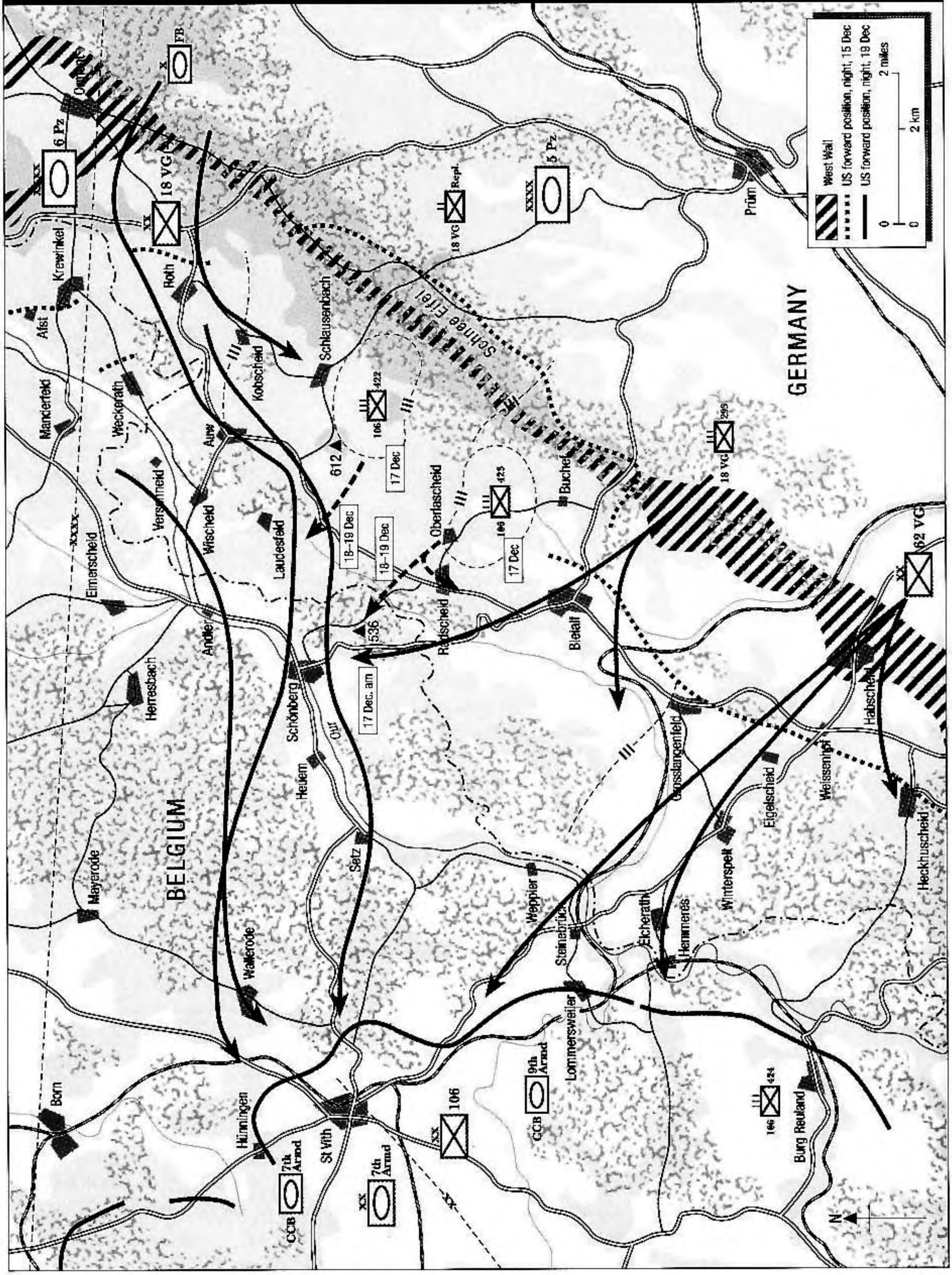


stopped cold by the prolonged fighting in Krinkelt-Rocherath, stalling the assault by *Hitlerjugend*'s powerful battlegroup. The penetrations of the Losheim Gap around Büllingen were very narrow, resulting in considerable traffic congestion along these routes, which was delaying the exploitation of the breakthrough by the heavy Panzer formations. The quickest and most devastating breakthrough had not occurred in the 6th Panzer Army sector as expected, but in the 5th Panzer Army sector due to Manteuffel's more prudent tactics. While this attack appeared to be progressing well, there was the worrisome matter of St Vith. This town sat astride the main road network leading westward, and its capture would be essential to fully exploit the breakthrough in this sector. Therefore, by the third day of the offensive, the German objectives were threefold: to try to push on to the Elsenborn Ridge from points further west such as Bütgenbach; to try to exploit the breakthrough in the southern portion of the 6th Panzer Army sector by the spearhead of the 1st SS-Panzer Div., Kampfgruppe Peiper; and to develop the breakthrough in the 5th Panzer Army sector by securing the St Vith crossroads.

Hodges' First US Army headquarters, located at Spa in the Ardennes, began receiving reports of the German attacks on the morning of 16 December. Middleton's VIII Corps headquarters at Bastogne had a difficult time providing a clear picture of the unfolding events due to poor communications with its forward units. As mentioned earlier, Middleton requested that the CCB of the 9th Armored Division, located near Faymonville to support the Roer Dams operation, be returned to support VIII Corps, a request that was granted. However, Hodges refused to call off the Roer Dams offensive at 1100hrs, arguing that the activity in the Ardennes was only a spoiling attack. By early afternoon, the First Army headquarters received a copy of Rundstedt's order of the day which began

Much of the fighting in Stavelot focused on the stone bridge over the Amblève seen here – the only one still intact. To the left of the picture under a heavy coat of snow can be seen Kingtiger number 222 of 501st schweres SS-Panzer Abteilung that was knocked out while supporting Kampfgruppe Sandig's attack on 19 December. This photo was taken on 10 January 1945 after heavy snow had set in; during most of the Stavelot fighting the area was relatively free of snow. (NARA)

DESTRUCTION OF 106TH INFANTRY DIVISION, 16–19 DECEMBER 1944


West Wall
US forward position, night, 15 Dec
US forward position, night, 19 Dec
0 2 miles
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N
GERMANY
BELGIUM
Schnee Eifel
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Our
6 Pz
XXXX
18 VG
XX
FB
X
5 Pz
18 VG Repl.
106 422
106 423
18 VG 295
62 VG
106
XX
7th Armd
CCB
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Ormont
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Manderfeld
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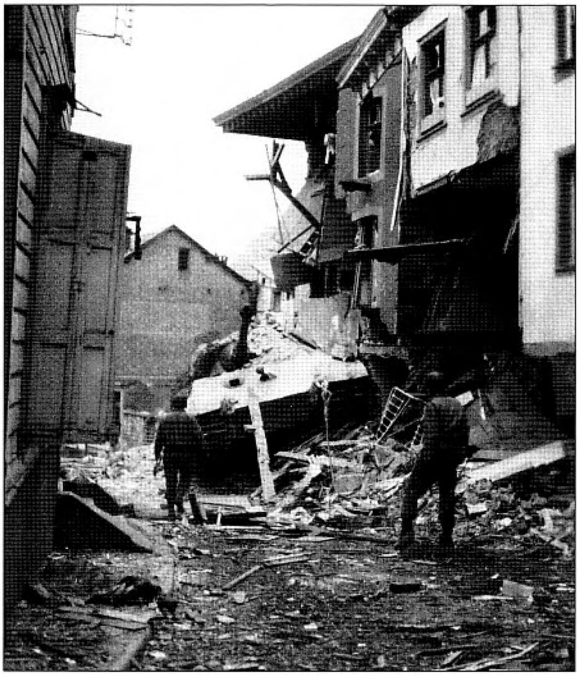
Radscheid
Bleialf
Laudesfeld
Wischeid
Verschneid
Eimerscheid
Andler
Herresbach
Schönberg
Heuem
Setz
Großlangenfeld
Eigelscheid
Weissenhof
Habscheid
Heckhuscheid
Winterspelt
Wepplar
Steinebrück
Elcherath
Hemmeres
Lommersweiler
Mayerode
Wallerode
Born
Hünningen
St Vith
Burg Reuland

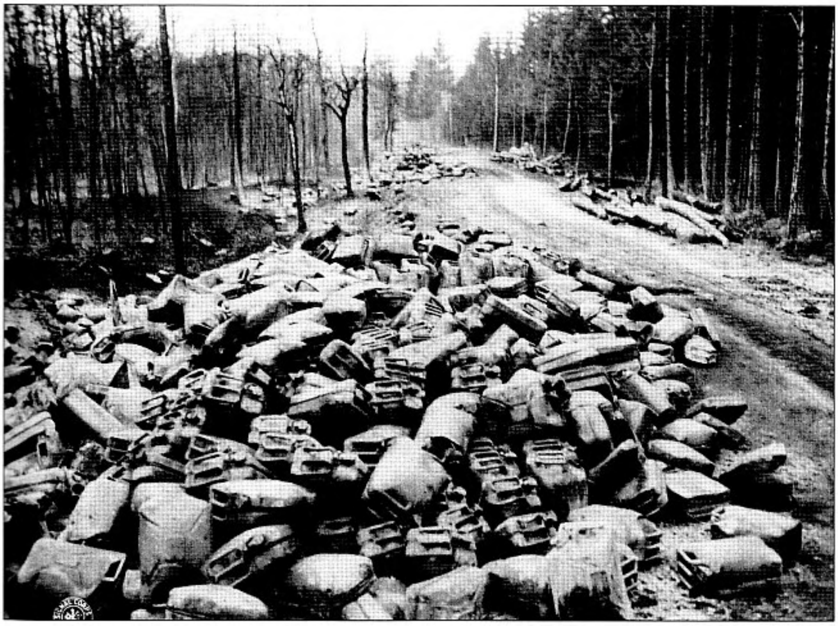
"Your great hour has arrived … We gamble everything!" This changed the view of German intentions, but even late in the day, many in the headquarters still felt it was nothing but a diversion to discourage the two US offensives in the works – the Roer Dams operation in the north, and Patton's planned attack in the Saar to the south. Nevertheless, a regiment of the 1st Infantry Division was transferred to Gerow's V Corps, which would prove instrumental two days later in the defense of Dom Bütgenbach.

The reaction in the 12th Army Group headquarters, located in Luxembourg City, was more vigorous. Bradley was in Paris that day conferring with Eisenhower, and first word of the offensive arrived in the afternoon. Bradley knew that the 12th Army Group had minimal reserves, so he immediately telephoned Patton and told him to transfer the 10th Armored Division from his planned Saar offensive to Luxembourg. He then phoned the 12th Army Group headquarters and instructed them to transfer the 7th Armored Division from Ninth Army to the Ardennes. The only other reserves were the two airborne divisions of MajGen Matthew Ridgway's XVIII Airborne Corps, the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions. These were refitting around Reims after prolonged deployment, and though not ready, were ordered to move by truck to the Ardennes immediately. Bradley's prompt actions would have vital consequences over the next few days.

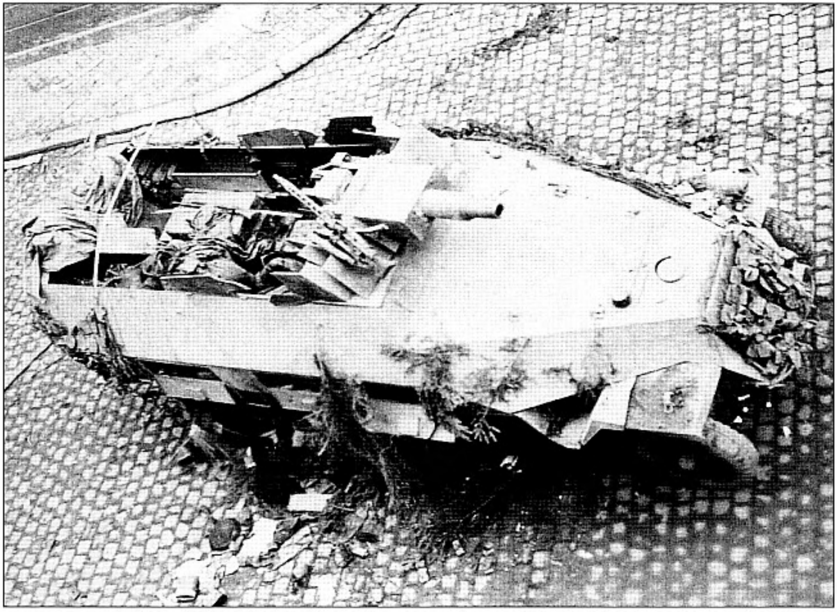
The debate over German intentions at the First Army headquarters ended on 17 December when the first reports emerged of German



During the fighting in Stavelot, this Kingtiger of sSS-PzAbt.501 stalled while climbing the hill on Rue Haut-Rivage, and then rolled back down the hill into this house where it became stuck. A couple of GIs from the 30th Division look it over after the town was retaken. (NARA)



Although desperate for fuel, Kampfgruppe Peiper was unaware of the US fuel dump on the Francorchamps road above Stavelot. Fearing it might fall into German hands, US troops set all 124,000 gallons on fire. It was the only major fuel dump not evacuated by the US Army. (NARA)



Kampfgruppe Peiper left Stavelot on its way north-west, and was followed later on 18 December by Kampfgruppe Knittel, which fought a losing battle against the 30th Infantry Division for the town later in the day. This SdKfz 251/9 75mm assault gun half-track was knocked out by a rifle grenade in the fighting. (NARA)

Panzers racing through the Losheim Gap. It was finally recognized that this was no spoiling attack. The Roer Dams attack was called off, and Gerow was given a free hand to organize a defense of Elsenborn Ridge. By 0930, the first reports began to arrive that two regiments of the 106th Division had been surrounded. The rest of the day was spent attempting to secure additional reinforcements. Within First Army, the remainder of 1st Infantry Division, and a regiment of the 9th Infantry Division were transferred to Gerow's embattled V Corps. General William Simpson of the Ninth Army telephoned and offered the 30th Infantry Division and the 2nd Armored Division. The 30th Infantry Division was the first of the two units to begin moving. By midnight 17/18 December, 80,000 troops and 10,000 vehicles were on their way to the Ardennes, a much prompter response than the Germans had anticipated. The CCB/9th Armored Division, and 7th Armored Division were committed to Middleton's VIII Corps, originally with plans to help rescue the two trapped regiments of the 106th Division. The 1st Infantry Division was used to buttress the defenses on the Elsenborn Ridge. The 30th Infantry Division was dispatched to the Malmédy area and the 82nd Airborne Division to Werbomont to seal off the Losheim Gap.

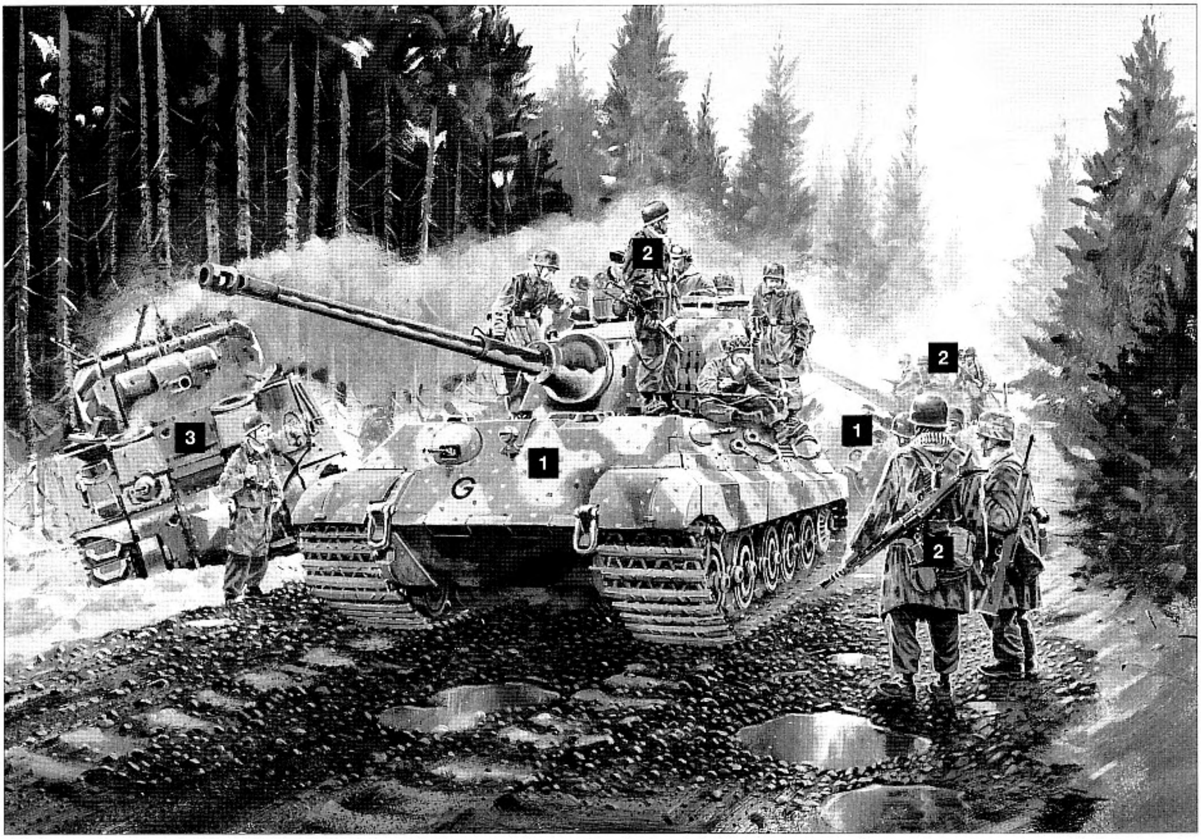
When a copy of the German operational plan was captured late on 16 December, First Army headquarters learned that the German offensive would eventually depend on captured fuel. As a result, on 17 December an effort began to remove the several large fuel dumps in the Ardennes especially the truck-head at Bütgenbach and the network of dumps south of Malmédy. Most of these were withdrawn except for 124,000 gallons near Stavelot which were burned to prevent them from falling into German hands.

On the afternoon of 18 December word arrived that a spearhead from Kampfgruppe Peiper had reached to within six miles of the First Army headquarters in Spa, a rumor that proved untrue. Nonetheless, the proximity of the German forces down the road in La Gleize convinced them to evacuate the headquarters at 2200hrs to Chaudfontaine in the suburbs of Liège. The haste with which this was done left a bad impression, especially among subordinate commands who found themselves temporarily cut off from instructions or support. Even though the move helped improve the headquarters security from immediate German attack, it posed another threat as the new site was in the flight path of V-1 buzz bombs being launched at Liège and Antwerp. The G-4 traffic headquarters was hit en route by a V-1.

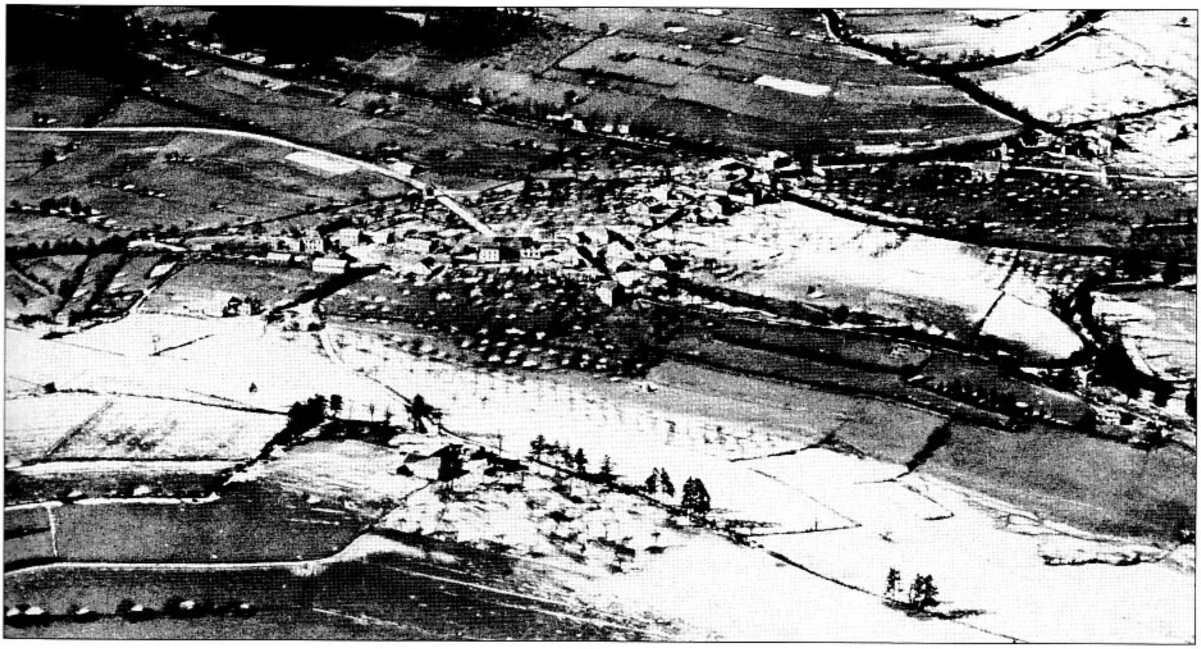
One of the most effective efforts by the headquarters was the unconventional activity of the section chiefs. Colonel William Carter, the engineer chief, mobilized his units to prepare roadblocks, lay minefields, demolish bridges, and construct barrier zones in the northern sector of the front. These were mostly rear area service units, normally assigned to construction and road building, but trained for secondary combat roles. The Germans would soon curse the "damned engineers" for harassing the Panzer spearheads and blowing key bridges. The 49th Antiaircraft Brigade responsible for defense against V-1 flying bombs moved a number of its units of 90mm anti-aircraft guns to defend the approaches to key locations including Huy, Liège, and Spa. Even the armor section got in on the act, taking the crews of the newly arrived 740th Tank Battalion and outfitting them with a motley selection of British Shermans, tank destroyers, DD tanks and whatever else was available, and dispatching them to the front. This unit would later serve as the cork in the bottle when Kampfgruppe Peiper was trapped at La Gleize.

On 19 December Eisenhower met with the senior commanders including Patton, Bradley and Devers at Verdun to discuss ways to deal with the German attack. The two basic options were to establish a secure defensive line to make a stand, or to begin counterattacking as soon as forces were available. Eisenhower made it clear he desired the second option, and wanted the initial attack to come from the south. Eisenhower was surprised by Patton's eagerness to shift a corps of three divisions in only three days, but this was possible due to the preparation of these units for the abortive Saar offensive. In addition Patton had shown foresight in

Riflemen of the 117th Infantry, 30th Division prepare to break down a door during street fighting in Stavelot on 21 December 1944. The two riflemen nearest the door have rifle-grenades fixed on their M1 Garand rifles, while the soldier to the left is armed with a M1 carbine. (NARA)



ATTACK IN THE ARDENNES – KAMPFGRUPPE PEIPER, 17 DECEMBER 1944 (pages 62–63)
Probably the most vivid image to have emerged from the Battle of the Bulge was the sight of the massive Kingtiger tanks advancing through the snowy pine forests of the Belgian border, immortalized by a series of photographs taken by a German combat cameraman on the morning of 17 December near the German/Belgian border. In many accounts of the battle, these images have symbolized the armored spearhead of Kampfgruppe Peiper as it steamrolled through American defenses at the start of the Ardennes offensive. In reality, the image highlights the underlying problems of the German offensive. The Kingtigers (1) **of s.SS-Pz. Abt. 501 were not in the vanguard of the German attack, but brought up the rear of Kampfgruppe Peiper due to the difficulties of moving such awkward and accident-prone tanks on the narrow country roads of Belgium. Peiper's spearheads were the old, reliable, and more fleet-footed PzKpfw IV medium tanks. The troops on the Kingtiger wear the distinctive camouflage smocks of the elite *Fallschirmjäger* paratroopers** (2)**, long respected by the US Army as the best of the German light infantry. Troops of this unit, the 3.Fallschirmjäger Division, had fought against the US Army in Normandy where they earned their fearsome reputation. By December 1944, however, they were a pale reflection of their former glory. Decimated in the summer 1944 fighting, the division was reconstructed using surplus Luftwaffe ground personnel and other recruits who would have been rejected in years past by such an elite formation. But the division's real problem was its leadership, with many of its units led by inexperienced Luftwaffe staff officers, not combat-hardened veterans. The declining effectiveness of the paratroopers was made embarrassingly clear on 16 December when a paratrooper regiment was held up all day at Lanzerath by a US infantry platoon, delaying the start of Kampfgruppe Peiper's advance by 24 hours. Infuriated by such incompetence, Peiper commandeered a battalion of paratroopers to reinforce his own force. Since the paratroopers could not keep up with his columns on foot, he had them ride on the backs of the Kingtiger tanks. The smoldering M4 tank** (3) **by the roadside is a victim of the earlier passage of Kampfgruppe Peiper; the Kingtigers saw very little combat during the opening phase of the offensive. Only a handful of Kingtiger tanks made it past Stoumont and on to La Gleize where Kampfgruppe Peiper was finally trapped. The illustration here is based on the famous photos taken on 17 December. The Kingtigers are finished in the typical camouflage pattern from the fall of 1944, called the ambush pattern, with a pattern of small dots over the usual three-color camouflage finish. The paratroopers are in their distinctive jump smocks and the unique helmets with the reduced rims. (Howard Gerrard)**



As can be seen in this aerial view of La Gleize, the town was heavily shelled. This view looks towards the northwest with the road to the left upper corner heading towards Stoumont and the road to the right center heading to Trois Ponts. (MHI)

planning for such an eventuality some days previously based on the assessments of his G-2 of the likelihood of a German attack in the Ardennes.

On the evening of 19 December Bradley received a telephone call from Eisenhower's chief of staff, Lieutenant General Walter Bedell Smith, suggesting that Eisenhower wanted to turn over control of the US First and Ninth Armies on the northern shoulder of the Bulge to Montgomery since this would avoid problems if communications were cut by the German advance. The main repeater station at Jemelle was located in the path of Manteuffel's advancing Panzers between Bastogne and Dinant. Bradley was concerned that the switch would discredit the American command at a very sensitive moment, and reluctantly agreed in the hopes that the British would commit their reserves to the campaign. He also received assurances that the reorganization would only be temporary. Bradley was deeply suspicious of this change as a result of Montgomery's interminable campaign to be appointed the main Allied ground commander.

The handover took place on 20 December and Montgomery strode into Hodges' HQ at Chaudfontaine later in the day like "Christ come to cleanse the temple". Though Montgomery's theatrics and arrogance infuriated the American officers, his energy and tactical skills helped to stabilize the command situation on the northern shoulder. He began to move the reserve XXX Corps to the Meuse to make certain that no German units would penetrate into central Belgium, and he dispatched liaison officers from the Phantom service[2] to coordinate the defensive actions along the front. American tactical commanders such as Hasbrouck and Clarke of the 7th Armored Division were later effusive in their praise of his role in restoring control. Never one to let modesty stand in the way, Montgomery's tactless remarks to the press several weeks later led to a crisis in the Allied high command that nearly resulted in Eisenhower relieving him of command.

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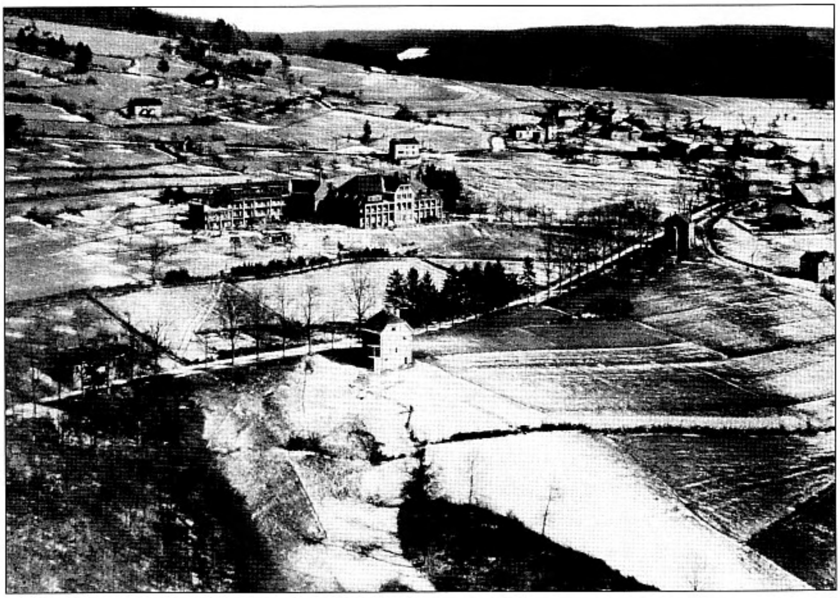
2 Montgomery's personal liaison service to communicate with his sub-units. It also included a signals intelligence unit that monitored Allied radio traffic to keep track of his subordinate units.

EXPLOITING THE BREAKTHROUGH

KAMPFGRUPPE PEIPER

The first attempt to exploit the breakthrough took place on the southern wing of the 6th Panzer Army by the 1st SS-Panzer Division. The delays in opening up the main approach avenue through Losheimergraben on 16 December prompted Hermann Preiss, the 1st SS-Panzer Corps commander, to re-arrange the route allotments and direct Jochen Peiper to move his Kampfgruppe (KG) through Lanzerath to the rail station at Buchholz, leaving the direct road to Losheimergraben open for the stalled *Hitlerjugend.*

The spearhead of Peiper's formation began moving towards Buchholz at 0330, and quickly overran the two hapless platoons from 3/394th Infantry who had been left behind when the rest of the battalion had pulled back. As the column cleared the woods approaching Honsfeld, the only opposition was the scattered elements of the 14th Cavalry Group and its attached 801st Tank Destroyer Battalion. The town itself had been used as a rear area rest camp for the 99th Division and stragglers had drifted in the previous day. There were also a dozen towed 3-in. anti-tank guns, some still limbered for travel. KG Peiper's column moved past a pair of 3in. anti-tank guns in the dark that were then overrun by infantry, and encountered small arms fire on reaching the town. Resistance quickly evaporated, and about 250 GIs were captured. While being marched back to Lanzerath a number of



This aerial view of Stoumont is centered on the Sanatorium where much of the heaviest fighting took place. This view looks towards the east, and the road to La Gleize is to the right and to Targnon to the lower left. (MHI)

A column of M36 90mm tank destroyers move forward in support of the 82nd Airborne Division's attempt to halt the advance of Kampfgruppe Peiper near Werbomont, Belgium on 20 December 1944. These were the only US Army vehicle capable of handling the Panther or Tiger tank in a frontal engagement. (NARA)

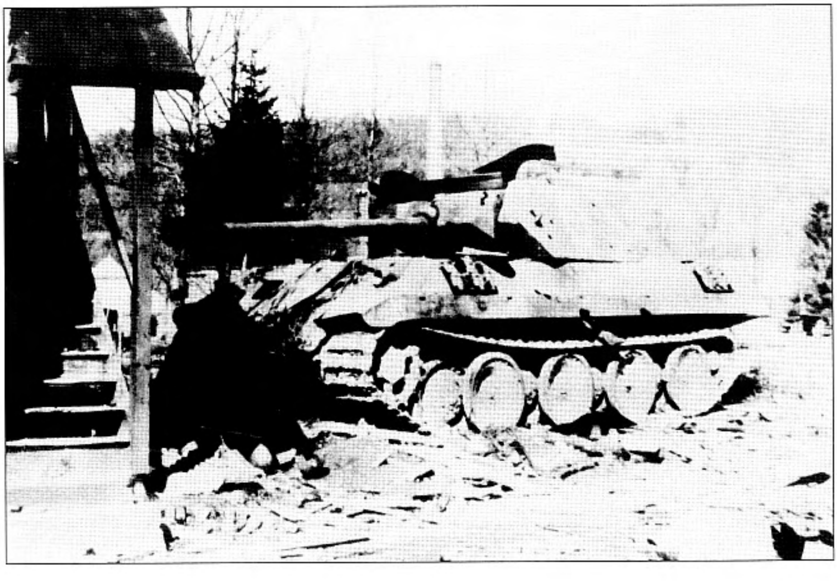
American prisoners of war and Belgian civilians were randomly killed, the beginning of the 1st SS-Panzer Division's loathsome record of atrocities during the campaign.

Peiper pushed his column forward to Büllingen, and there was little organized defense of the town except for the 254th Engineer Battalion, which hastily deployed a company along each of the main roads leading into town. Peiper's column reached the town before dawn and there was sporadic fighting between the engineers and the lead Panzers. Bazooka teams and 3in. anti-tank guns knocked out a few German tanks. Peiper's column also overran two airfields used by divisional spotting aircraft, but those from the 2nd Infantry Division mostly managed to escape. The engineers withdrew to a manor farm along the Bütgenbach road dubbed "Dom Bütgenbach" that would later figure in the fighting, but which for now was ignored by the German advance. There are two roads out of Büllingen, one towards Elsenborn Ridge via Bütgenbach (currently called N632), and the other, N692 to the southwest. Peiper moved to the southwest, as the other route to the northwest was allotted to the neighboring *Hitlerjugend* which was still entangled in the Krinkelt-Rocherath fighting.

The spearhead of Peiper's columns moved through open farm country from Moderscheid to Thirimont. To save time, some tanks and half-tracks tried to go across the farm fields, only to find the ground so muddy that they became stalled. The columns, which stretched all the way back to the German border, were subjected to at least three strafing attacks by US P-47 fighters during the morning, but with little damage.

During this advance, Peiper captured some US military police and was told there was a major American headquarters in the village of Ligneuville. Peiper decided to investigate, and ordered a company to take a short-cut along minor farm roads but they became trapped in the mud. As a result, Peiper ordered his armored spearhead under Werner Sternebeck to go the long way around via Waimes, and the Baugnez crossroads. While approaching the crossroads, they ran into a column of trucks from B/285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion, one of the elements of the 7th Armored Division moving to St Vith. As the columns met around 1300hrs, the lead German PzKpfw IV tanks fired on the trucks, bringing them to a halt. Sternebeck's men quickly captured the lightly armed Americans and about 90 men were herded together in a field near the crossroads, joined later by additional prisoners when more American trucks stumbled into the ambush. After most of Peiper's column had passed the crossroads, a massacre took place of the prisoners, the details of which remain controversial to this day. It would appear that the massacre started around 1500hrs when a tank crew assigned to guard the prisoners began taking random pot shots at the prisoners, a vile amusement repeated from earlier in the day at Honsfeld. This was followed by machine gun fire from the two tanks. For a while, troops from passing vehicles continued to fire randomly at the wounded and the dead, and finally troops from the SS-Pioneer Company were sent into the field to finish off any survivors. In total, some 113 bodies were found in the field in January when the US Army recaptured the crossroads. The incident has become infamous as the Malmédy massacre and a post-war trial was conducted of Peiper and many of his surviving officers and men.

In fact there was no major US headquarters in Ligneuville and at the time the village had been abandoned by the service elements of CCB/9th Armored Division, which had set off earlier in the day towards St Vith. The lead Panther of the column was knocked out by an M4 dozer tank under repair, but the town was taken with little fighting. Through dusk Peiper's columns snaked their way through the foothills of the Amblève valley without encountering any opposition. On the approaches to the town of Stavelot around 1800hrs, they encountered a small engineer roadblock and came under small arms fire. Surprisingly, Peiper decided against a night attack into the town. The exhaustion of his troops after two days with little sleep was probably a more important factor than the feeble resistance encountered. At the time, the town was held only by a single engineer company. Peiper's delay in attacking Stavelot gave the US defenders time to prepare. A small task force from the 526th Armored



Skorzeny's Panzer Brigade 150 was committed to the attack on Malmédy on 21 December. The Panther tanks kept their disguise as American M10 tank destroyers, and this one was knocked out with a bazooka by Private F. Currey of the 120th Infantry who was later decorated with the Medal of Honor for his actions that day. (MHI)

Infantry Battalion arrived after dark, and with so little knowledge of the layout of the town, the defense was poorly prepared and the key Amblève bridge weakly defended and not prepared for demolition.

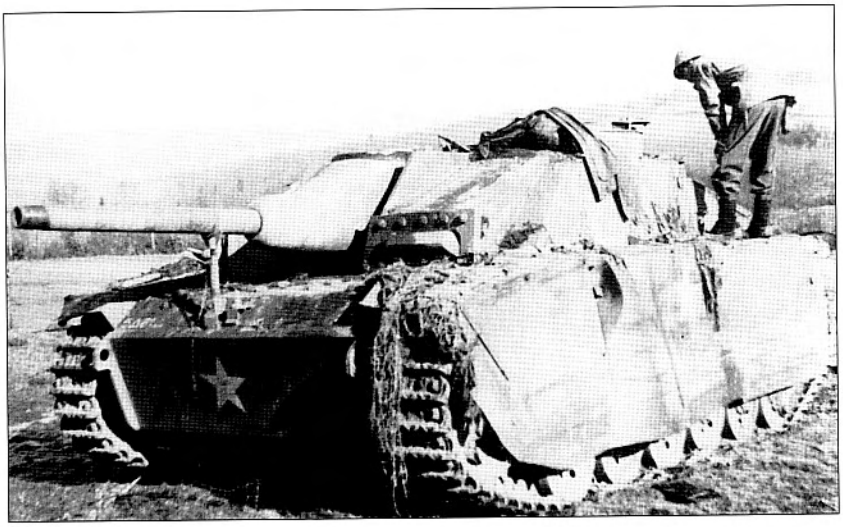
Kampfgruppe Peiper resumed their attack at 0400 on 18 December by deploying Panzergrenadiers in the southern fringes of the town opposite the bridge. As the newly arrived GIs attempted to set up roadblocks with anti-tank guns at 0600, they were brought under fire. A Panzergrenadier platoon made its way over the bridge but was quickly forced back to the southern side. In the meantime, German engineers determined that the bridge was not prepared for demolition. After receiving reinforcements, another attack was made at dawn but control of the north side was in question until the first Panther tanks arrived. The first Panzer was hit by a 57mm anti-tank gun positioned up the street, which failed to penetrate, and the tank drove over the gun. The German troops advanced rapidly through the town, losing one Panzer to a 3in. anti-tank gun, but by 1000 the town was in their hands. The remnants of the US task force retreated north to a large fuel dump on a side road outside the town. To prevent the Germans from capturing it, 124,000 gallons of gasoline were poured into a gully and ignited. Peiper, in a rush to seize the critical bridges at Trois Ponts, had not realized it was there.

The three bridges in Trois Ponts for which the town received its name, had all been prepared for demolition by US engineers. A lone 57mm anti-tank gun guarded the road from Stavelot and managed to knock out the lead German tank when it approached around 1145hrs. Although the gun was quickly destroyed and the small roadblock overwhelmed, the delay gave the engineers time to blow up both the Amblève bridge and one of the two bridges over the Salm river. Prevented from using the main route to Werbomont and having left his tactical bridging behind, Peiper redirected his columns along the more circuitous route up the Amblève valley through La Gleize. A small bridge on a poor secondary road was found near Cheneux, but in the late afternoon the weather cleared and the column was hit by US fighter-bombers. Two tanks and several half-tracks were damaged, blocking the road. As importantly, US observation aircraft slipped through the cloud cover and were able to pass back detailed information on the size and direction of Peiper's force for most of the rest of the afternoon.

By the time that the damaged vehicles at Cheneux were moved aside it was dusk. A bridge was found over the Lienne stream, but it was blown by US engineers as the German spearhead approached. After dark a small group of half-tracks and tank destroyers attempted to use small side roads to reach the road junction at Werbomont, but were ambushed by an advance patrol from the US 30th Infantry Division. As Peiper had been moving through the Amblève valley, newly arrived American reinforcements began to block the main exits towards Liège. Instead of facing small rearguards made up of engineers and scratch defense forces, Peiper would now begin to face more substantial opposition.

A new threat began to emerge behind him. He had expected that the bulk of the 3rd Fallschirmjäger Division would close up behind his columns and occupy Stavelot. But a battalion from the US 30th Division joined the remnants of the task force that had fought for Stavelot earlier in the day and launched an attack on the town in the late afternoon. A Panzer column returning from Trois Ponts through Stavelot became

A bazooka team from Co. C, 325th Glider Infantry, 82nd Airborne Division guard a road near Werbomont on 20 December after a probe from Kampfgruppe Peiper reached as far as Habiemont, four kilometers to the east. This was the furthest point west reached by Peiper, and his forces pulled back to Stoumont later in the day due to increasing US attacks. (NARA)



Besides the five Panther tanks converted to resemble M10 tank destroyers, Panzer Brigade 150 also had five Sturmgeschütz III assault guns, painted in American markings, with an ineffective disguise. This one from Kampfgruppe Y was abandoned between Baugnez and Geromont. (NARA)

mixed up in the battle, as did a few Kingtiger heavy tanks. The fighting continued through the night and the next day Stavelot was back in US hands. The US control was still patchy so that some German forces were still able to infiltrate past to reinforce Peiper. Nevertheless, the recapture of Stavelot cut Peiper off from the rest of his division.

With his rear now under attack, Peiper frantically tried to find other routes to the west. Since the road out of La Gleize to the southwest was blocked, Peiper decided to try the better road towards Stoumont, even though there were already reports it was held in force by US troops. In fact, the lead elements of the 119th Infantry, 30th Division arrived in Stoumont after dark, shortly after the spearhead of Kampfgruppe Peiper had bivouacked outside the town.

By the morning of 19 December Peiper's force in La Gleize had dwindled to a paltry 19 Panthers, 6 PzKpfw IVs and 6 Kingtigers, the remaining 86 Panzers having broken down, been knocked out, bogged down, or become lost during the previous days' odyssey. With thick fog covering the area, Peiper decided to strike Stoumont before the Americans could prepare their defenses. The US forces in Stoumont consisted of the 3/119th Infantry supported by eight towed 3in. anti-tank guns and a 90mm anti-aircraft gun. The attack began at 0800 with the Panzers going straight down the road, and the Panzergrenadiers advancing through the fog on foot. The 3in. anti-tank guns were quickly overrun and in the ensuing two-hour battle, one US infantry company was surrounded and forced to surrender, and the other two pushed out of town. The US regimental commander dispatched a reserve infantry company to the scene, and in conjunction with ten M4 tanks of the 743rd Tank Battalion, executed a fighting retreat along the road past Targnon with Panzers on their heels.

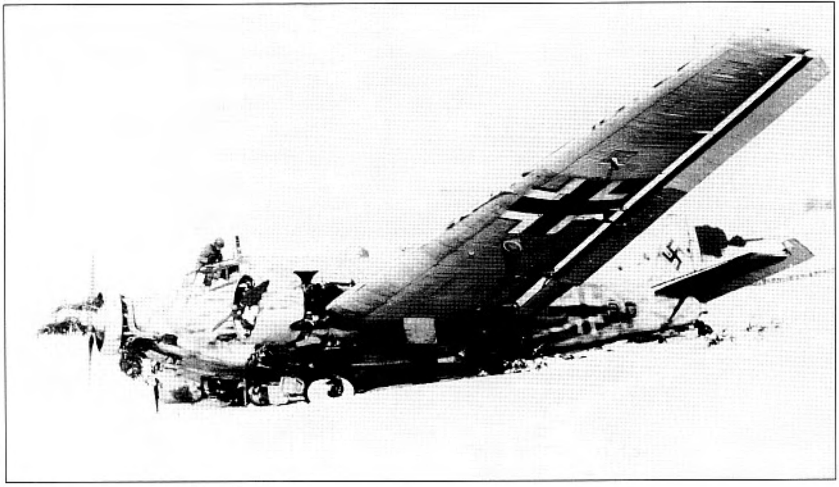
While attempting to exploit their success the Panzer spearhead ran into a 90mm anti-aircraft gun situated on a bend to the west of the town, and were temporarily halted. A few Panzers reached the village of Targnon where a bridge led to the southwest and the Werbomont road junction. Peiper was hesitant to push his force in this direction, as by late afternoon, his armored vehicles were running very low on fuel. To reinforce the Targnon roadblock, the First Army cobbled together

A trio of GIs of the 120th Infantry, 30th Division in Malmédy on 29 December 1944. The town was originally held by a scratch force of engineers and the 99th Infantry Battalion until the arrival of the 120th Infantry prior to Skorzeny's attack. (NARA)

some tank support. The 740th Tank Battalion had recently arrived in Belgium without tanks and some of its officers were dispatched to a depot and told to requisition whatever tanks were available. This totaled 14 British M4 tanks, five M4A1 duplex-drive amphibious tanks, and a M36 90mm tank destroyer. A platoon from this unit arrived to the west of Stoumont at 1530 and was thrown into the fray to support an infantry attack on the Stoumont railroad station west of Targnon. Three Panthers were knocked out in the ensuing encounter and Peiper pulled his forces back into Stoumont. Whether he realized it at the time or not, this was his battlegroup's high-water mark.

The German offensive was going badly awry. By late on 19 December additional forces were closing in on Peiper from the north and west. The 82nd Airborne Division had already arrived at Werbomont and was moving towards the Amblève valley from the west. A combat command of the 3rd Armored Division was dispatched down the road from Liège and its three task forces approached La Gleize down three separate roads to prevent Peiper from moving towards the First Army headquarters in Spa. By the end of 19 December Kampfgruppe Peiper was low on fuel and trapped in the Amblève valley around La Gleize, 45km from Liège, and 65km from its initial objective on the Meuse River at Huy that Peiper had hoped to reach on the first day of the offensive.

The southern arm of 1st SS-Panzer Division had advanced with far less opposition. Kampfgruppe Hansen had cleared the border area near Krewinkel, and after a short delay in minefields along the front line, they began a rapid advance with the Jagdpanzer IV tank destroyers in the lead. Their route was through the Losheim Gap, weakly defended by retreating elements of the hapless 14th Cavalry Group. By late on 17 December Hansen's battlegroup was only a short distance behind Peiper's and had encountered no serious opposition. The following day a small task force of the 18th Cavalry Squadron and some towed 3in. anti-tank guns were ambushed by a group of Hansen's Panzergrenadiers bivouacked in a woods astride the road from Poteau



Von der Heydte's paratroopers were dropped into the Hohes Venn by Ju-52 transports like this one. This particular example, from Transport-Squadron.3, was abandoned near Asselborn in northern Luxembourg near a German field hospital. (NARA)

to Recht. The column was quickly overcome. While this small encounter hardly figures in the larger picture of combat actions in the sector, the aftermath of the skirmish was caught by a German photographer whose film was later captured by the US 3rd Armored Division. These four rolls of film constitute most of the surviving images of the German Ardennes offensive, and are among the most famous of the battle. Kampfgruppe Hansen advanced no further as at 1400, he was ordered to withdraw his force to Recht with an aim to keep open this route for the planned advance of the 9th SS-Panzer Division, the lead element of the 2nd SS-Panzer Corps. Hansen was furious at the order, as the route to the Salm River crossing at Viesalm was weakly protected and his troops could have arrived there later in the day. Instead, the lead elements of the US 7th Armored Division arrived in Poteau late in the day – the opening phase of the battle for St Vith. Hansen's troops remained idle through 19 December, awaiting the 9th SS-Panzer Division.

On 20 December US forces were again pressuring Kampfgruppe Peiper's defenses. The main US concern was the threat posed to Spa, but Peiper was oblivious to the US headquarters there. Task Force McGeorge was sent down the road from Spa but was stopped before reaching La Gleize. Two companies of the 504th PIR, 82nd Airborne Division attempted to secure Cheneux, but two attacks during the afternoon and evening left them with barely a toehold in the town.

Of more immediate consequence to Peiper, US actions at Stavelot were ending any hope of reinforcement. Task Force Lovelady from the CCB/3rd Armored Division seized control of the road from La Gleize to Stavelot on 20 December and engaged Kampfgruppe Knittel near Trois Ponts which controlled the only remaining access to La Gleize from the German side. Knittel made another attempt to wrest control of Stavelot from the 117th Infantry, but by the end of the day, the Americans were in firm control of the west bank of the Amblève. The following day, the 1st SS-Panzer Div. commander, Wilhelm Mohnke, ordered Kampfgruppe Hansen to reinforce Knittel for another try against Stavelot. The 1st SS-Panzergrenadier Regiment crossed the Amblève east of Trois Ponts but a Jagdpanzer IV following the grenadiers collapsed the bridge and left them isolated on the western bank without support. Attempts to bridge the Amblève were a failure. TF Lovelady linked up with the Stavelot defenders and was reinforced by two more companies from the 30th Division. After another hard day of fighting, the third German attempt to regain Stavelot was foiled.

Peiper's defenses were driven in by attacks on 21 December. After failing to clear out the paratroopers in the outskirts of Cheneux in the morning, another battalion from the 82nd Airborne Div. outflanked the town that afternoon, forcing Peiper to withdraw his infantry back to La Gleize. American attacks against the more heavily defended positions in Stoumont were frustrated by the heavy fog and Panther tanks. The road behind Stoumont was temporarily captured by US infantry, but a quick counterattack restored the situation in the afternoon. Although Kampfgruppe Peiper had managed to hold the village for another day, Peiper had too little infantry to defend the town and withdrew his forces back to La Gleize after dark.

The renewed attempts to relieve Peiper from the Stavelot area on 22 December were again frustrated by Task Force Lovelady. A counter-attack near Biester in the late afternoon almost cut the task force in two, but instead resulted in heavy casualties for Kampfgruppe Hansen.

Many of von der Heydte's units were dropped in the wrong location along with this airborne ammunition container which fell into American lines near Kornelimunster north of the Monschau forest. (NARA)

After consolidating in La Gleize, KG Peiper had been reduced to less than a third of its starting strength – some 1,500 troops – and a fifth of its original Panzers: 13 Panther tanks, 6 PzKpfw IVs, and 6 Kingtigers as well as an assortment of other vehicles. Fuel and ammunition were low. The day's fighting proved frustrating for both sides as they ineffectively probed each other's defenses. Late on 22 December Mohnke contacted Peiper and let him know that the attempt to reach him earlier in the day had failed again. Peiper consulted with his senior officers and asked Mohnke permission to attempt a breakout. This was refused but the corps commander, Hermann Preiss, asked Dietrich for permission to divert the 9th SS-Panzer Division from its advance to clear out Stavelot and open up an escape route. Dietrich refused, and an attempt to airlift supplies to La Gleize that night proved ineffective as only about a tenth of the material parachuted from three Ju-52 aircraft landed within the German perimeter.

US forces began a major effort to clear the remaining German forces from the western side of the Amblève on 23 December but didn't manage to do so until the following day. Kampfgruppe Knittel withdrew its last forces before dawn on Christmas day and by Christmas the Stavelot area was in US hands. This ended any plans to rescue Kampfgruppe Peiper.

Peiper was surrounded by about three battalions of infantry and four tank companies with US units probing eastward from Stoumont, and and westward from the other side of La Gleize. These attacks were frustrated by Panzer fire from La Gleize, but Peiper's troops were on the receiving end of a punishing artillery bombardment. One of the most effective weapons was a single M12 155mm self-propelled gun that fired almost 200 rounds into the town from the outskirts at practically point-blank range. Although Dietrich had refused permission for Peiper to break out the day before, the grim situation around Stavelot led him to pass the buck down the chain of command to the divisional commander, Wilhelm Mohnke. Peiper was given permission to breakout at 1400hrs on 23 December and began planning to escape that night. About 800 men were deemed fit enough for the attempt, and all the wounded were left behind. The walking wounded were given the task of setting fire to or disabling the surviving equipment after the evacuation had taken place. The retreat out of La Gleize began around 0200hrs on 24 December through the woods to the immediate south of the town. About 770 survivors reached German lines 20km away about 36 hours later, having had only brief encounters with paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division. US troops occupied La Gleize in the early morning hours of 24 December after brushing past some rearguards and were surprised to find the town abandoned except for the German wounded and 107 captured GIs.

The 1st SS-Panzer Div. had failed in its mission and had suffered heavy casualties. Personnel casualties through Christmas were about 2,000 men of which more than 300 were prisoners. Equipment losses through Christmas were far heavier and included 11 Kingtigers, 27 Panthers, 20 PzKpfw IV, 12 JagdPz IV or about 65 per cent of the division's initial tank and tank destroyer strength with a significant fraction of the remainder broken down or trapped in the mud.

SPECIAL OPS: OPERATION *GRIEF* AND *STÖSSER*

The German special operations associated with the Ardennes offensive proved complete non-events, yet had consequences far beyond their meager accomplishments. Skorzeny's formation, Panzer Brigade 150, had been formed in November 1944 in an attempt to recruit soldiers with a knowledge of English who could pass as American troops. Less than a dozen with colloquial American English were found, along with another 400 who spoke the language with less proficiency. As a result the size of the unit was scaled back to two battalions and the best speakers were segregated into a commando unit – the Steinhau team. Attempts to collect captured American equipment were not particularly successful as few German frontline units wanted to part with their much-prized jeeps, and the tanks and armored cars that were rounded up were in poor mechanical condition. Five Panther tanks were modified to look like M10 tank destroyers, and five Sturmgeschütz III assault guns were modified to hide their identity. The brigade was assigned two separate missions. The Steinhau team totaling 44 soldiers was broken up into six groups, usually consisting of a few men in a jeep, with four groups to infiltrate behind US lines for reconnaissance and two groups to conduct diversionary tasks such as destroying bridges, misdirecting traffic and cutting communications. The main body of Panzer Brigade 150 was positioned to the rear of 1st SS-Panzer Corps, and once the Hohes Venn was reached beyond the Elsenborn Ridge, the unit would be injected in front of the advancing German force, pretending to be fleeing US troops, and race to capture at least two bridges over the Meuse at Amay, Huy or Andenne.

The Steinhau teams departed during the first two days of the offensive. At least 8 commandos were captured, although American records suggest that a total of 18 were caught. The actual effect of the teams is difficult to calculate since they have become shrouded in myth and legend. While no major reconnaissance discovery or major demolition operation was carried out by the Steinhau teams, the capture of several of the groups caused chaos in American rear areas. The 106th Division captured a document outlining the general scheme of Operation Grief the first morning of the fighting, and several of the captured German commandos revealed their mission. One spread the rumor, entirely false, that a team was on its way to assassinate General Eisenhower, which led to his virtual imprisonment at his headquarters for a few days. A young American counter-intelligence officer, Earl Browning, came up with the idea of asking suspicious characters trivia questions about sports or Hollywood that would only be known by someone living in the United States. The security precautions caused far more trouble than the Steinhau teams themselves.

After the 1st SS-Panzer Corps failed to make a significant dent in American defenses in the Elsenborn region, Skorzeny realized that there was little chance that his unit would actually be used as intended. On the evening of 17 December, he was given permission for it to serve with the 1st SS-Panzer Division in an attempt to capture the key crossroads town of Malmédy, which had been by-passed by Kampfgruppe Peiper earlier in the day.

Malmédy was initially held by the 291st Engineer Battalion. Curiously enough it was then reinforced by a US unit specifically assigned to deal with rear area threats. In November 1944 the First US Army had formed a Security Command around the 23rd Tank Destroyer Group to counter German guerilla groups and saboteurs. Two of its units, the 99th (Norwegian) Infantry Battalion and "T Force" consisting of an armored infantry battalion with a supporting tank destroyer company, were dispatched to the Malmédy-Stavelot depot area to guard the junction until the 30th Division arrived. The 120th Infantry, 30th Division arrived in Malmédy before Peiper's attack began on 21 December.

Peiper's force attacked before dawn along the two main roads into the town. In the early morning darkness, the columns were stopped by concentrated rifle and bazooka fire, reinforced with artillery. As dawn broke and the fog lifted, American artillery spotters were able to work over the German forces stalled near one of the bridges leading into town. By the afternoon both German battlegroups were forced to withdraw having lost many of their strange Panzers. Another attack was launched before dawn on 22 December but was quickly beaten back. Rather than risk any further German advances, the US engineers blew several of the key bridges later in the afternoon. One of the most tragic episodes of the Malmédy fighting occurred the next day when US bombers, mistakenly informed that Malmédy was in German hands, bombed the town, killing over 200 civilians as well as some US troops. Panzer Brigade 150 remained in the lines until late December and was later returned to Germany and disbanded.

The German paratroop mission, Operation *Stösser*, was an even clumsier mess than Operation *Grief*. After having been delayed a day due to a lack of trucks to transport Colonel von der Heydte's paratroopers to the airbases, it finally set off at 0300hrs on 17 December. One rifle company was dumped 50km behind German lines near Bonn and the signal platoon ended up immediately in front of German lines along the stalemated Monschau front in the north. The drop was hindered

A column of infantry from the 26th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division is seen here moving down the Büllingen road on 17 December 1944 on its way to the Dom Bütgenbach manor farm. This regiment's defense of the road junction finally halted the attacks of *Hitlerjugend*. (NARA)

by severe crosswinds as well as poor navigation, and only about 60 paratroopers landed with von der Heydte himself in the Hohe Venn moors. This was too small a group to carry out the planned capture of Meuse bridges since such a small force could certainly not hold on to any bridge. Over the next few days, the paratroopers performed reconnaissance, conducted nuisance raids, and gathered another 300 paratroopers scattered over the Belgian countryside. With 1st SS-Panzer Corps nowhere near the Meuse River and not even on Elsenborn Ridge, the mission of the paratroopers was pointless. Late on 21 December they were ordered to cross back to German lines near Monschau.

Hitlerjugend Halted

On the evening of 18 December, after its costly attack on Krinkelt-Rocherath, the 12th SS-Panzer Division *Hitlerjugend* was ordered by the corps commander, Hermann Preiss, to shift the main direction of its attack towards Bütgenbach. Movement was slow due to the traffic jams in the Eifel and the wretched state of the roads through Losheimergraben after the past days' heavy traffic. The forest roads were not designed for this level of use, and in some areas, the constant travel of heavy tracked vehicles had worn down the road into muddy trenches with the road banks level with the Panzers' engine decks.

The 26th Infantry of "Big Red One" – the 1st Infantry Division – held the Bütgenbach approaches. The regiment was in rough shape after having fought along the fringes of the Hürtgen forest earlier in the month. It was deployed east of Bütgenbach, with its lead battalion, the 2/26th Infantry on a hill overlooking the manor farm of Domane Bütgenbach, better known to the Americans as Dom Bütgenbach. The first element of *Hitlerjugend* to arrive in the area around noon of 18 December was Kampfgruppe Bremer, based around a reconnaissance battalion. A patrol consisting of an SdKfz 234 armored car and a Kubelwagen moved up the road towards Dom Bütgenbach and both vehicles were destroyed by a 57mm anti-tank gun hidden in the fog. The two trucks that followed disgorged their infantry into the woods to the south of the farm and they were decimated by an artillery barrage.

The main elements of *Hitlerjugend* reached Büllingen on the night of 18/19 December in three battlegroups. The first attack was launched around 0230hrs by Kampfgruppe Kühlmann consisting of 12 Jagdpanzer IV tank destroyers from schweres Panzerjäger Abteilung 560 and two companies of Panzergrenadiers of 26th SS-Panzergrenadier Regiment. With the armor in the vanguard and the grenadiers behind, the attack formed up 700 yards in front of the American positions, cloaked in the dark and thick fog. The 26th Infantry began firing illumination rounds from their mortars and then called in artillery. The potent combination of artillery and small arms fire stopped the Panzergrenadiers, and several of the tank destroyers became bogged in the muddy ground in front of the American positions. Three tank destroyers broke through into the manor itself, but they turned back when confronted with a 155mm artillery barrage. Two of the three were knocked out while trying to escape. The attack petered out after an hour leaving about 100 dead, and three burning Jagdpanzers.

The American positions were pounded by German artillery until around 1015hrs. An attack from the south along the Morschheck road was spearheaded by an SdKfz 234 armored car and a tank destroyer. Both were knocked out at close range by a 57mm anti-tank gun and the Panzergrenadier company was almost wiped out in the ensuing artillery and mortar barrage. A second attack was launched shortly after from Büllingen but after two Jagdpanzers were knocked out the attack faltered. By this stage, the forward elements of *Hitlerjugend* were suffering from ammunition shortages, and further attacks were postponed until more supplies could be brought forward along the congested roads. *Hitlerjugend*'s commander, Hugo Kraas, reinforced Kampfgruppe Kühlmann with the remainder of his available tanks and Jagdpanzers. The reinforced German battlegroup set off around midnight and was immediately subjected to US artillery fire even while forming up. The main thrust came from Büllingen with a supporting thrust from Morschheck. Once again spearheaded by tank destroyers from the 560th schweres Panzerjäger Abteilung, the attack again encountered very stiff resistance and heavy artillery fire. At least five Jagdpanzers broke through the infantry trench line and advanced into the manor farm itself. Without infantry support, two were destroyed by bazooka teams and two more withdrew. Several of the German tank destroyers became stuck in the mud and the fighting finally ended around 05.30 as both sides licked their wounds. The American infantry had held, but there were serious shortages in bazooka rockets and anti-tank mines. Casualties on both sides had been high, and about 12 Jagdpanzers had been knocked out or bogged down in the fourth attack on Dom Bütgenbach.

Rather than give the Americans time to recover and reorganize their defense, Kraas sent other elements from Kampfgruppe Kühlmann to attack the manor around 0600hrs. This included eight surviving Jagdpanzers from Morschheck, and about ten PzKpfw IVs and Panthers from Büllingen. The Jagdpanzers crunched into the American trench line, running over at least one 57mm anti-tank gun. As in the previous attacks, American artillery and small arms fire kept the Panzergrenadiers away from the American trench line, and when the German Panzers reached the forward defenses, they were hunted down in the fog by bazooka teams. The attack finally collapsed around dawn. It was the last major attack on 20 December, though smaller infantry attacks continued through the day to little effect. The sPzJgAbt.560, which had been the backbone of the attacks on the manor, was reduced in strength to three Jagdpanthers and ten JagdPz IVs, from an initial strength of 12 Jagdpanthers and 25 JagdPz IVs.

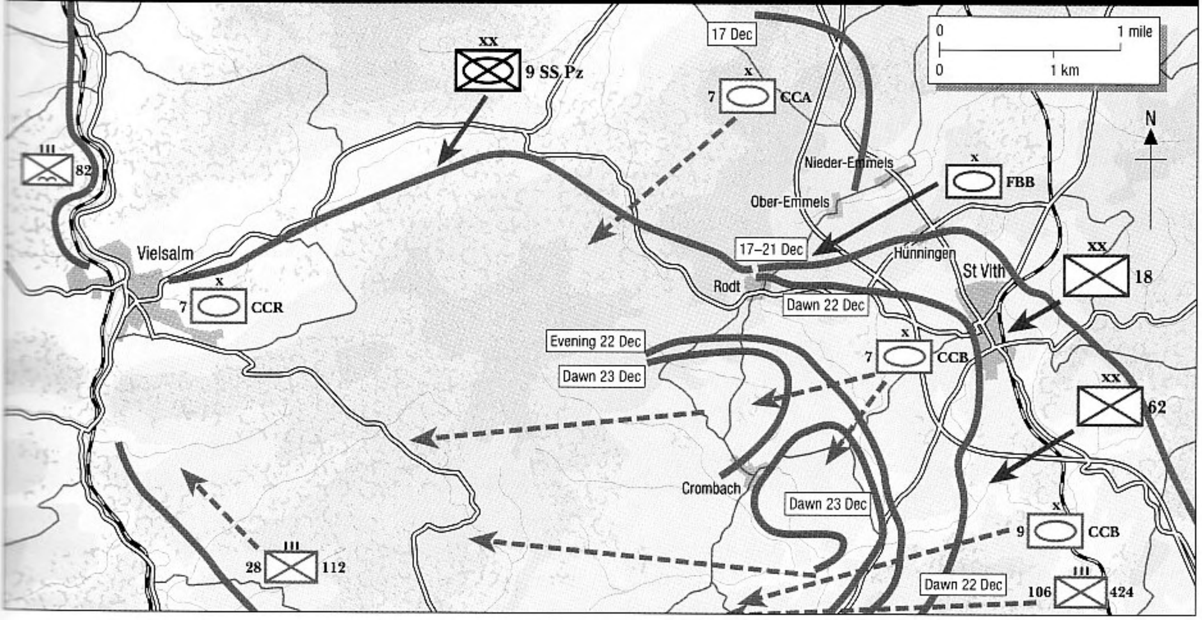
In desperation Kraas decided to make one last assault with all his Panzergrenadier battalions and surviving armor. All four artillery battalions supported the attack with their remaining ammunition. The heavy artillery barrage hit the American positions around 0300 on 21 December, causing severe casualties. The Americans responded by calling in their own artillery on suspected assembly points. The attack was postponed when a Panzergrenadier battalion became lost in the dark. It was finally located and the attack began around 0625, three hours behind schedule. The attack began badly when the lead Panther tank and a Jagdpanther following it were destroyed by 57mm anti-tank gunfire. Nevertheless, the Panzers managed to knock out every surviving 57mm anti-tank gun defending the southern positions facing the Morschheck road. The attack continued until dawn, with eight PzKpfw IV tanks fighting their way into the manor itself. Two M4 tanks and two PzKpfw IV tanks were destroyed in a point-blank duel. The remaining six began moving through the farm buildings, followed by a half-dozen Panzergrenadiers, the only German infantry to make it into the manor. They were quickly killed by headquarters staff from the regimental command post, and the PzKpfw IV tanks used the cover of the stone farm buildings to try to avoid being hit by tank fire from a pair of M4 tanks on a neighboring hill.

The pre-dawn attack had ripped open a gap in the American defenses along the southern side, but continual artillery fire prevented the German infantry from exploiting it. A renewed Panzer attack around 1000 from the south side was stopped cold when an M10 tank destroyer knocked out several tanks in quick succession. The fighting continued intermittently through the late morning, with reinforcements finally arriving in the early afternoon on the American side in the form of four M36 90mm tank destroyers of the 613th TD Battalion. These were assigned to hunt down the surviving PzKpfw IV tanks lurking in the farm itself. They began firing their guns through the wooden walls of the barn, convincing the Panzer crews to retreat. Two of the three tanks were hit while withdrawing and only one escaped.

This last attack convinced Kraas that it would be impossible to open Rollbahn C towards Liège. The *Hitlerjugend* Division was subsequently pulled out of this sector and sent into the southern sector, later becoming involved in an equally futile attack against Bastogne. Casualties in the attack on the Dom Bütgenbach manor were over 1,200 of which there were 782 dead. During the five days of fighting at Krinkelt-Rocherath and Dom Bütgenbach, *Hitlerjugend* lost 32 of its 41 Panthers, 12 of its 33 PzKpfw IV tanks, three of its 14 Jagdpanthers, and 18 of its 26 Jagdpanzer IV tank destroyers – almost 60 per cent of its initial armored strength.

The losses in the 23rd Infantry had been heavy as well, including 500 killed, wounded or captured out of an initial strength of about 2,500 men. Equipment losses were heavy including five 57mm anti-tank guns, three M4 tanks and three M10 3in. tank destroyers. But the 23rd Infantry had

DEFENSE OF ST VITH, 17–23 DECEMBER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held the Bütgenbach manor and prevented a German breakthrough along the northern route. Divisional artillery, and supporting artillery from neighboring units on the Elsenborn Ridge had been essential in the defense, and during the fighting, about 10,000 artillery rounds were fired in support of the 23rd Infantry.

The Lost Gamble

The failure of the 1st SS-Panzer Corps along the northern shoulder of the Ardennes salient doomed Hitler's plans. The reasons for their failures are many, ignoring for the moment the basic strategic problems with the plan. Dietrich had no "finger-feel" for the battlefield, underestimating the problems posed by the US infantry defenses in the wooded area along the forward edge of battle. The preliminary artillery barrage was a mistake since it caused few US casualties yet ensured that US defenses were alerted when the first wave of German infantry advanced into the forest. The lead infantry units were not given sufficient armored support to overcome the American defenses, as a result of which they faltered in the face of well-entrenched troops. The attacks were channeled down the handful of roads suitable for vehicle traffic instead of making use of the many smaller forest trails which would have allowed the use of more infantry units to infiltrate past the sparsely scattered US defenses and envelope them from the rear. Once out of the woods, the 12th SS-Panzer Division became entangled in the defenses at Krinkelt-Rocherath. Skeptical of the fighting quality of the Volksgrenadier divisions after their failures in the forest fighting, *Hitlerjugend* failed to use them in overcoming the American defenses in the Twin Villages or later at Dom Bütgenbach. The use of isolated tanks in the built-up towns without sufficient infantry support led to a "Panzer graveyard".

Peiper was much more successful in sticking to the mission plan since he faced such paltry opposition in the opening days of the attack.

The farmyard of Dom Bütgenbach was littered with knocked out equipment including this PzKpfw IV, one of the handful to reach the manor itself during the final skirmishes. In the foreground is a M36 90mm gun motor carriage of 613th Tank Destroyer Battalion. (NARA)

Yet the delays of the first few days, first at Lanzerath, and then on the outskirts of Stavelot, proved fatal. The configuration of his force was ill-suited to a contested advance, being encumbered by fuel-guzzling tanks, especially the Kingtigers, and bereft of bridging equipment or adequate infantry and artillery support. Although fuel shortages would help trap his group in La Gleize, German tactical intelligence was so poor that Peiper had no information on the location of significant US fuel dumps that were within his grasp.

THE DEFENSE OF ST VITH

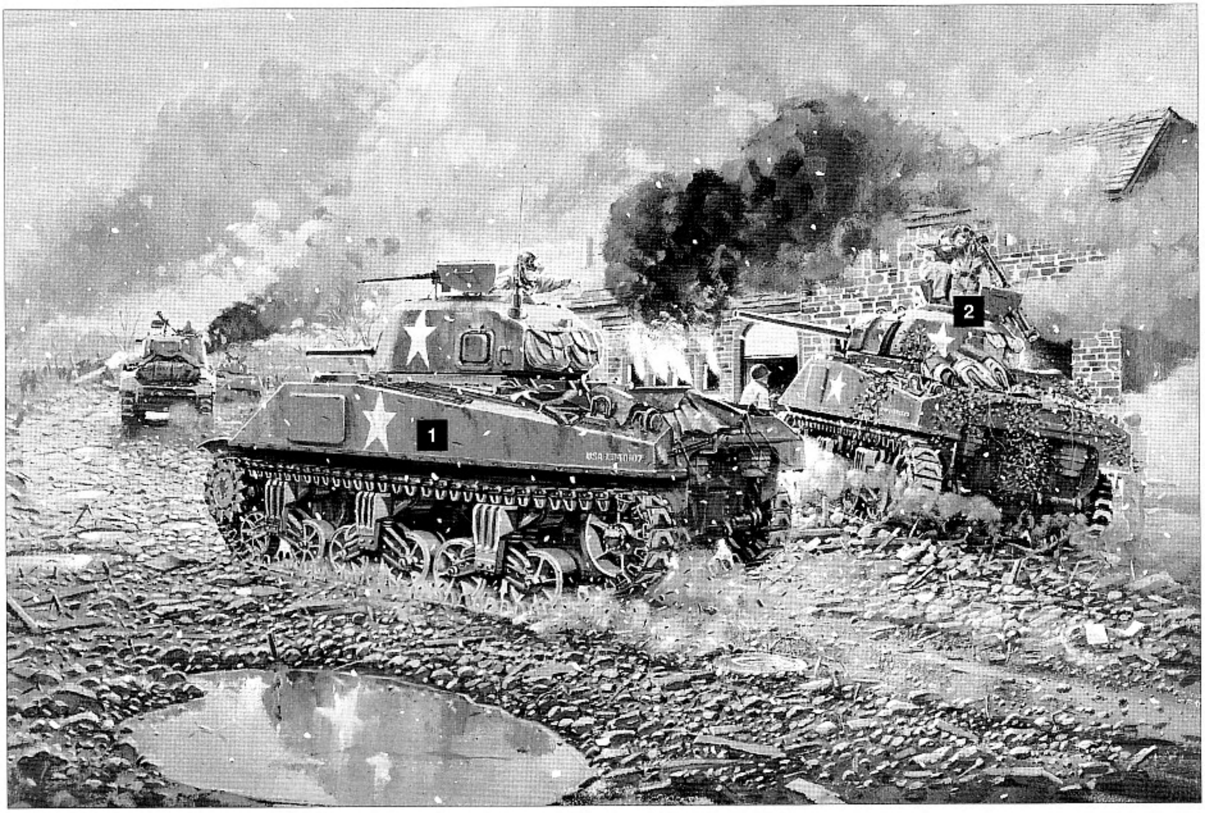
Of the three German armies that staged the Ardennes operation, the only one to gain a significant breakthrough was Manteuffel's 5th Panzer Army in the center. With the disintegration of the 106th Division on the Schnee Eifel, a substantial rupture was created in the American line. This rupture assisted the southern elements of the 6th Panzer Army, notably Kampfgruppe Peiper, and led to rapid advances by units of the 5th Panzer Army, especially the drive of the 116th Panzer Division on Houfallize. However, the full exploitation of this sector was hampered by an extended salient around the key road junction of St Vith that acted as "a thumb down the German throat".

St Vith had been the headquarters of the hapless 106th Division. By 17 December William Hoge's CCB/9th Armored Division had begun to arrive and was in the process of reinforcing the isolated 424th Infantry. The commander of CCB/ 7th Armored Division, BrigGen Bruce Clarke, arrived in St Vith at 1030hrs. Major General Alan Jones explained that he had lost contact with his two regiments on the Schnee Eifel, and that he wanted Clarke to attack towards the Losheim Gap to relieve them. With his armored columns having a difficult time moving from the Netherlands due to the congested roads, Clarke suggested that they contact both regiments and agree on a common meeting point. Clarke was disturbed to learn that the division had no firm radio communications with either regiment as all the field telephone lines had been cut and the division had not set up a proper radio net prior to the attack. During this discussion, Colonel Devine of the 14th Cavalry Group burst in, following the rout of his command along the Poteau-Recht road, in a state of near collapse. The divisional headquarters was in turmoil and paralyzed by confusion, yet at 1330 when MajGen Middleton called Jones, he was told that "Clarke is here, he has troops coming. We are going to be all right." Clarke was disturbed that Jones would provide such a deceptive picture of the actual situation to the corps commander, but Jones remarked that "Middleton has enough problems already". By 1430 German troops were beginning to approach St Vith from the east, and small arms fire could be heard on the approaches to the town. Jones turned to Clarke and said "You take command, I'll give you all I have". Although inferior in rank to Jones and several of his divisional staff, Clarke was the only officer at the headquarters with any combat experience, and so took command of the rapidly disintegrating defense. The only organized force in the town was the divisional engineer battalion and an attached corps engineer battalion. Clarke ordered the division engineer, Lieutenant Colonel Tom Riggs, to take the troops along with the headquarters security platoon and to advance down the road to the east of the town, dig in and stop any advancing German forces. There were a few bright spots. Lieutenant Colonel Roy Clay, commander of the 275th Armored Field Artillery Battalion, attached to the shattered 14th Cavalry Group, showed up at the headquarters and asked Clarke if he wanted any fire support. His unit provided the only artillery support of the St Vith defense until the 7th Armored Division arrived and remained a vital element of the defense.

Command of the St Vith sector fell to BrigGen Bruce Clarke of CCB/7th Armored Division after the 106th Division's headquarters departed. Clarke had commanded the CCA/4th Armored Division in September 1944 when it repulsed an earlier German counter-offensive during the Lorraine campaign. (MHI)

By the afternoon some 7th Armored Division units began to arrive led by Troop B, 87th Cavalry Recon Squadron. They were hastily dispatched to create a defensive line north and east of the town. German attacks were uncoordinated due to the rush to move westward. Elements of Kampfgruppe Hansen bumped into the western defenses near Poteau, while infantry forces from the 18th VGD probed along the eastern edges of the town. The bitterest fighting on 18 December took place around Poteau as CCA/7th Armored Div. attempted to seize the town which was essential to keep open supply lines to the rear.

Manteuffel had expected his units to capture St Vith on the first day of the offensive. The town posed a variety of problems, not the least of which was that it split the 5th Panzer Army in two. Furthermore, it controlled the best roads through the area between 6th Panzer Army and 5th Panzer Army, including the only decent east–west rail line, vital to resupply the offensive once the Meuse was reached. On the night of 17/18 December, Manteuffel discussed the problem with Model, who suggested that the Führer Begleit Brigade (FBB) be committed to destroying the St Vith pocket. This brigade was one of the best in 5th Panzer Army, its cadres having been taken from the *Grossdeutschland* Division. It was in army reserve, with an aim to use it as the main exploitation force after one of the Panzer corps succeeded in making a breakthrough. As a result reassigning it to deal with St Vith meant giving up the opportunity to use it in the central role in the later phase of the campaign. This reassignment indicates how seriously both Model and Manteuffel viewed the threat posed by St Vith. Manteuffel hoped that the injection of this unit into the St Vith battle would result in a quick



THE FORTIFIED GOOSE EGG – REARGUARD DEFENSE IN ST VITH, 21 DECEMBER 1944 (pages 86–87)

General Bruce Clarke's approach to defending St Vith was to use the mobility and firepower of his tank units to keep the Wehrmacht at bay as long as possible. US armored divisions were weak in infantry with only three battalions per division, and while they could be used for defense, the type of linear defense in depth practiced by infantry units was out of the question. So the tanks and other supporting troops held positions as long as possible, and then fell back to more defensible positions. Here we see a pair of M4 medium tanks conducting a rearguard action in the outskirts of St Vith shortly before Clarke was forced to abandon the town. The M4 medium tank was a durable, reliable design but by the winter of 1944, it was out-classed when facing the newer German Panzers such as the PzKpfw V Panther tank. Like most of the campaigns of 1944–45, the St Vith fighting saw very few tank-vs.-tank encounters and the M4 usually fought against German infantry. In such a mission, many tankers preferred the older version of the M4 armed with the 75mm gun as seen here (1)**, rather than the newer version introduced in the summer of 1944 with the long-barreled 76mm gun. Although the 76mm gun was more effective against Panzers, it fired a mediocre high explosive projectile compared to the older 75mm projectile, which contained almost twice the amount of high explosive. More than three-quarters of the tank gun projectiles fired in 1944–45 were high explosive, so the preference for the older gun was not as crazy as it sounds. A significant problem with the M4 medium tank was its mediocre armor, which had not been increased since its debut in 1942. While some tank units had begun to add sandbags or other forms of improvised armor to their Sherman tanks, this was not yet a common practice in the 7th Armored Division during the Ardennes fighting. Actually, the division had used sandbags during the summer and fall, but when Clarke took over the CCB, he ordered all the sandbags and camouflage netting removed. Clarke, like many veterans of the Patton's Third Army, felt that sandbags were ineffective and adversely affected the tank's automotive performance. The tank in the background has been hit and the crew can be seen baling out** (2)**. One of the most common causes of US tank losses in the late 1944 fighting was the German *Panzerfaust*, a small disposable rocket launcher that fired a shaped-charge grenade. This was capable of penetrating the armor of the M4, but it was not particularly accurate, and had to be fired from close range, rendering its user very vulnerable to return fire. If it did hit the M4, it stood a good chance of setting off an internal ammunition fire. It is largely a myth that the Sherman burned due to its use of a gasoline engine. Operational studies concluded that most were lost after their ammunition caught fire. Usually the ammunition propellant caught fire when its brass casing was penetrated by a hot shard of metal from the anti-tank projectile. It took about 30 seconds before the propellant fire spread to neighboring ammunition, and once this occurred, the inside of the tank became a blast furnace with the fire often lasting a day or more. Sherman crews soon learned that once their tank was hit, it was a good idea to bale out as soon as possible. (Howard Gerrard)**

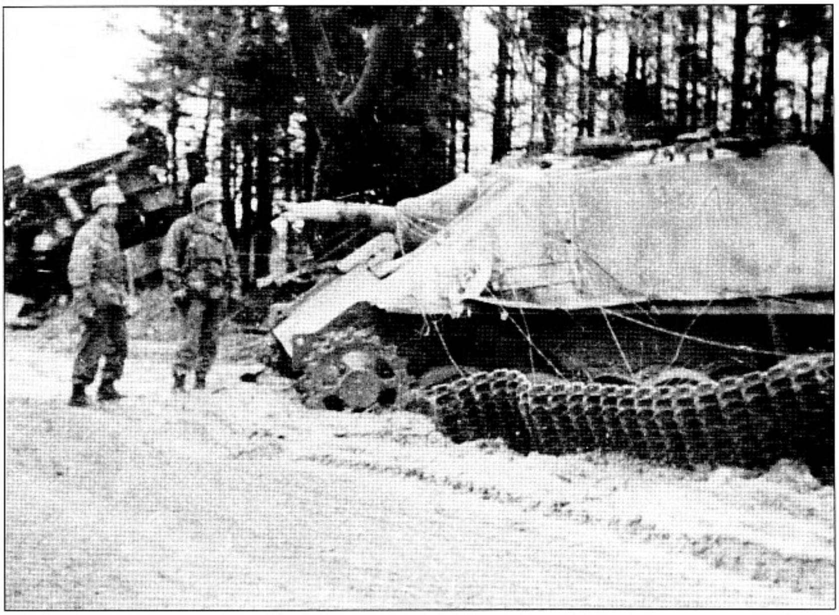
decision, permitting the brigade to revert back to its original mission. Moving the brigade through the congested area behind the Schnee Eifel proved to be a major problem and even though the brigade was underway on the morning of 17 December, it was still tied up in the traffic jams around Schönberg late the following night. The plan called for the FBB to attack the town from the north, the 18th VGD from the east, and the 62nd VGD from the south. Although the initial attack was scheduled for 19 December, the continued delays in moving the FBB into position made this impossible.

The southern sector held by CCB/9th Armored Div. and the 424th Infantry was precarious, so late in the day, Hoge's combat command withdrew over the Our river. Hoge drove to St Vith that night expecting to meet with Gen Jones, but encountered Bruce Clarke instead. Although nominally under the command of the 106th Division, Hoge agreed to remain in the salient with Clarke to protect the southern flank. Other units also gravitated to the St Vith pocket including the 112th Infantry, separated from its 28th Division.

The first serious attack against St Vith developed around midnight on 19/20 December when the FBB deployed the first units to arrive in the sector, an infantry battalion and two assault gun companies. This attack was quickly repulsed, but later in the day, the lightly defended outposts in Ober- and Nieder-Emmels were taken. The attacks substantially intensified on 21 December as more of the FBB arrived. One battalion from the brigade managed to temporarily seize control of a portion of the road westward from St Vith to Viesalm, but this force was pushed back by CCB/7th Armored Division. One of the most significant changes from the previous days' fighting was the more extensive use of German artillery, which had finally escaped from the traffic jams. An intense barrage of the town began at 1100hrs. Most of the German attacks were preceded by intense artillery fire, and the grenadiers attacked with little respite. The positions of the 38th Armored Infantry Battalion on the eastern side, which included the remnants of Col Riggs' original engineer defense force, was hardest hit in five attacks that afternoon. More intense attacks followed with three more in the late afternoon and early evening, the first along the Schönberg road, then down the Malmédy road, and finally up the Prum road. The defensive line of the CCB/7th Armored Division was penetrated in at least three places by evening, with few replacements available. By 2200hrs Gen Clarke realized that the current positions were not tenable and decided to pull his forces out of the town, to the high ground southwest of the town. The town was occupied by the 18th VGD the night of 21/22 December. Clarke estimated that he had lost almost half his strength in the day's fighting.

The American resistance in the St Vith salient was substantially delaying the German advance westward since it prevented the 6th Panzer Army from supporting the rapid advance of the 5th Panzer Army further south. Model ordered the pocket crushed and directed Dietrich to commit elements of the 2nd SS-Panzer Corps to assist in the task. The early morning fighting of 22 December took place in the midst of a heavy snowfall, and began at 0200hrs with a major attack of the FBB against Rodt, to the west of St Vith. This saw the heaviest use of Panzers in this sector to date, amounting to three companies with about 25 tanks. The FBB had great difficulty operating tanks due to the extremely muddy

The CCB of 9th Armored Division was the first reinforcement to reach St Vith, and was commanded by BrigGen William Hoge. He commanded the Engineer Special Brigade at Normandy, and when posted to the 9th Armored Division, the commander complained, arguing that he should have been given a divisional command. (NARA)



The road leading from Dom Bütgenbach towards Büllingen was littered with destroyed and abandoned equipment including this Jagdpanther tank destroyer from sPzJgAbt.560 and an overturned PzKpfw IV from 12th SS-Panzer Regiment. (MHI)

conditions in the area, and several Panzers became stuck in the mud before reaching the town. The fighting in Rodt was savage with M4 tanks blasting away at Panzergrenadiers ensconced in the town's stone houses, but by late morning, the US defenders were forced to withdraw. The fighting lasted for nine hours and action separated Clarke's CCB from the rest of the 7th Armored Division. The 62nd VGD also succeeded in pushing back the CCB/9th Armored Division, further compressing the St Vith pocket.

There had been a re-organization of the command structure in the sector that day, with the 7th Armored Division now falling under the XVIII Airborne Command, and the northern elements of the First US Army coming under the overall command of the British 21st Army Group and Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery. During the fighting Clarke was visited by his divisional commander, MajGen Robert Hasbrouck ,who had brought along the new plan for the sector from Gen Matthew Ridgway of the XVIII Airborne Corps. Ridgway proposed that 7th Armored Division remain in place, even though surrounded, in several "fortified goose-eggs" that would be supplied by air. Clarke remarked that it looked more like "Custer's last stand" and both officers were disturbed by the concept, which they thought reflected Ridgway's paratrooper mentality, inexperience with armored units, and lack of understanding of the precarious state of the units in the salient. Ridgway wanted Clarke to hold on to St Vith and planned to eventually push forward with the 82nd Airborne Division. The British liaison officer at Hasbrouck's command post caught wind of the argument and informed Montgomery. Montgomery visited the 7th Armored Division to gain his own impressions, and later left for Ridgway's headquarters. After a heated discussion with Hodges at First US Army headquarters, Montgomery sent a message to the 7th Armored Division commander, Robert Hasbrouck, "You have accomplished your mission – a mission well-done – It is time to withdraw", having rejected Ridgway's unrealistic plan. The 82nd Airborne pushed forward to Vielsalm to create an escape corridor for the forces inside the St Vith salient.

An officer from the 87th Reconnaissance Squadron, 7th Armored Division looks over the ruins of St Vith on 24 January 1945 after the town was retaken. (NARA)

By the evening of 22 December, CCB/7th Armored Div. had been pushed back about a kilometer along a ridge line stretching from the village of Hinderhausen to Neubruck, with CCB/9th Armored Div. being pushed in behind it from the south. By this stage, the 82nd Airborne Division held the west bank of the Salm river near Vielsalm, but intense pressure from the 6th Panzer Army was making this defense increasingly difficult. The plan was to withdraw the CCB/9th Armored Div. first but this proved impossible due to the intensity of the contact with the 62nd VGD and the muddy condition of the roads. Hoge was seriously concerned that they would have to abandon all their vehicles and retreat on foot as the mud was so deep. Hasbrouck radioed Clarke and Hoge that "if you don't join them [the 82nd Airborne] soon, the opportunity will be gone". The withdrawal time was reset for 0600hrs on the morning of 23 December. That evening Clarke instructed rear area troops to chop branches from pine trees along the escape route to provide some firm footing along the muddy road. Much to his relief, the temperature dropped abruptly on the night of 22/23 December, freezing the ground rock hard along the one road out of the salient. The withdrawal was successfully executed, with German forces close on the heels of the retreating US forces. During the morning fighting, two FBB Panzers were knocked out, and a few of the US tanks were lost as well. The cost of the defense of St Vith was 3,400 casualties, 59 M4 tanks, 29 M5A1 light tanks and 25 armored cars.

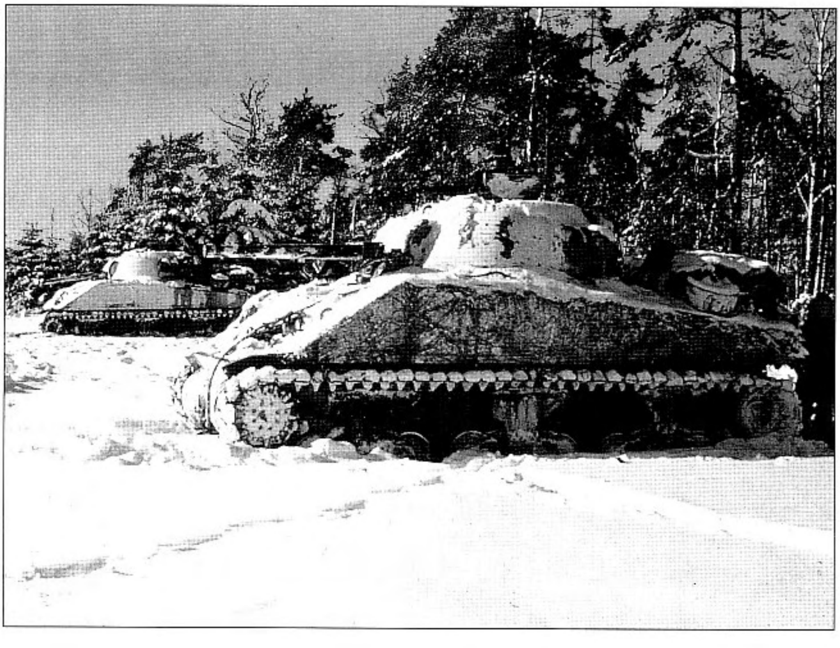
AFTERMATH

The successful defense of the St Vith salient for six days had several significant effects on German operations. It tied down forces of 5th Panzer Army intended for other missions, especially the Führer Begleit Brigade. Its proximity to the main advance routes of the 6th Panzer Army seriously delayed the commitment of the 2nd SS-Panzer Corps until the second week of the fighting. After the war Manteuffel wrote to Clarke that "the outstanding delaying actions around St Vith were decisive for the drive of my troops and for the 6.SS-Panzer Army too! In that respect, the battle of St Vith was of greatest consequence for the two armies – and the whole German offensive. In the end, St Vith fell, but the momentum of the 58th Panzer Corps in the south had been destroyed and that influenced the southern [47th Panzer] corps too!" The defense of St Vith influenced other sectors as well, preventing the 6th Panzer Army from using alternate routes to relieve Kampfgruppe Peiper, trapped at the time in La Gleize.

While the Battle of the Bulge was far from over on 23 December 1944, Hitler's plans had been foiled. The main stroke, the 6th Panzer Army attack towards Liège, had been decisively stopped by the defeat of the 12th SS-Panzer Division at Krinkelt-Rocherath and Dom Bütgenbach, and the destruction of the spearhead of the 1st SS-Panzer Division at La Gleize. When the road junctions around St Vith were finally opened on 23 December, it permitted a belated surge of German Panzer units forward towards the Meuse – so badly delayed it was a charge to nowhere. The 2nd Panzer Division came near to reaching the Meuse at Dinant on Christmas Day, but ran out of fuel. By this time British armored units had taken up positions on the western bank of the Meuse, and there were no significant strategic objectives in this sector. Units of the 2nd SS-Panzer Corps raced west only to find the approaches blocked by fresh American reinforcements. There would be fierce battles along the front for the next few days, but the German advance had reached its high water mark by Christmas far short of its objectives. The delay caused by the defense of St Vith had given the 12th Army Group time to shift additional forces into the Ardennes, including the 2nd and 3rd Armored Divisions. These reinforcements halted the Panzers during a series of sharp battles around Christmas. On 26 December the spearheads of the 5th Panzer Army began retreating. Furthermore, the spearhead of Patton's Third Army, the 4th Armored Division, was on the outskirts of Bastogne, and the siege of that other vital road junction would end shortly.

THE BATTLEFIELD TODAY

The Battle of the Bulge devastated the small towns in the Ardennes, and much has been rebuilt since the war. Nevertheless, rural communities such as these do not change quickly, and though the roads are much better than in 1944, the terrain features are much the same. Some of the wooded areas have changed little, and there is still evidence of the trenches and dugouts from the fighting. A set of good road maps is an absolute must, as it is easy to get lost in the maze of small roads. A road trip from Lanzerath to La Gleize takes only a few hours, and highlights why Kampfgruppe Peiper had such a hard time reaching the Meuse. There are numerous monuments to the fighting scattered around the Ardennes notably the Malmédy massacre memorial at the Baugnez crossroads, and many museums catering to the tourist trade. The *December 1944 Historical Museum* located near the church in La Gleize is one of the best in the area, with a very good selection of artifacts and historical photos and it is located in the midst of the battlefield where Kampfgruppe Peiper made its last stand. One of the more intriguing museums is the *Ardennen Poteau '44 Collection* of Jacqueline and Rob de Ruyter, which is located on the site where many of the famous German wartime photos were taken. This museum includes a vehicle collection, and tours of the battlefield are offered from the back of an OT-810 half-track modified to resemble its wartime antecedent, the German SdKfz 251 Ausf. D.



M4 medium tanks of the 40th Tank Battalion, 7th Armored Division in the fields outside St Vith after the town was recaptured in January 1945. (NARA)

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Due to its importance, the Battle of the Bulge has been the subject of hundreds of books, especially from the American perspective. The northern sector has received far less treatment than Bastogne and the southern sector, and the focus here is on a selection of books dealing with this sector rather than on the many general histories of the campaign.

This book was heavily based on unpublished material as well. The best perspective on the German side is provided by the scores of interviews conducted with nearly all the senior German commanders by the US Army after the war as part of the Foreign Military Studies effort. Copies of these are available at several locations including the US Army Military History Institute at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, and the US National Archives in College Park, Maryland. Some of these have been reprinted in two books edited by Danny Parker: *Hitler's Ardennes Offensive* and *The Battle of the Bulge: The German View* (Greenhill and Stackpole, 1997, 1999). The US Army MHI has an extensive collection of interviews with senior US commanders, and the several interviews conducted after the war with Gen Bruce Clarke are particularly illuminating about the fighting for St Vith. Besides the many wartime after-action reports, there are a large number of unpublished US Army studies of the battle including *The Defense of St. Vith, Belgium 17–23 December 1944: An Historical Example of Armor in the Defense* (US Armored School, Ft. Knox, 1949) and *Tank Fight of Rocherath-Krinkelt 17–19 December 1944* (OCMH, 1952). There is a very useful Master's history dissertation prepared by a veteran of the fighting, Frank Andrews, *The Defense of St. Vith in the Battle of the Bulge, December 1944* (NYU, 1964).

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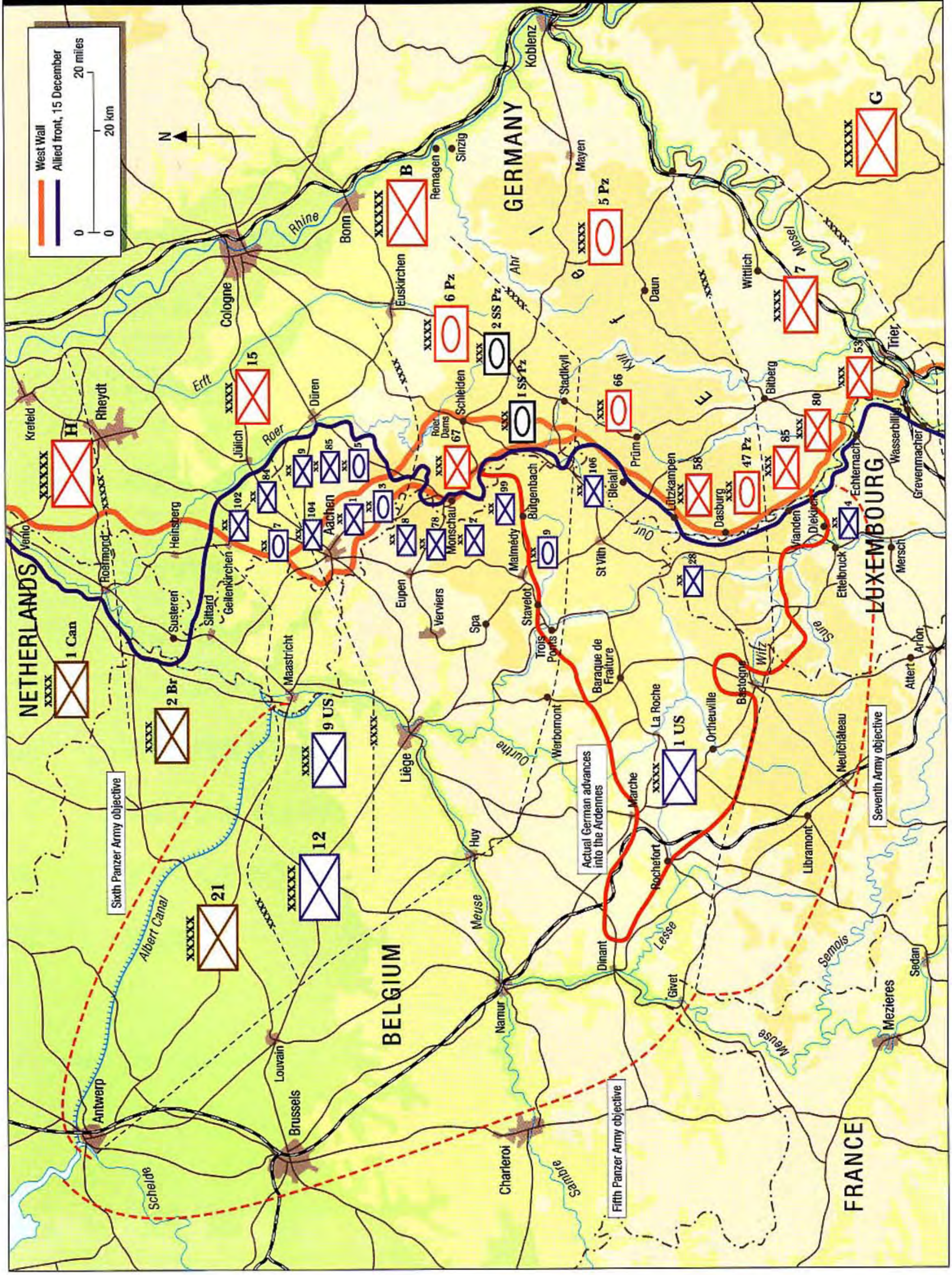
STRATEGIC SITUATION, 16 DECEMBER 1944


West Wall
Allied front, 15 December
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0 20 km
N
NETHERLANDS
GERMANY
BELGIUM
LUXEMBOURG
FRANCE
E i f e l
XXXXX H
XXXXX B
XXXXX G
XXXX 15
XXXX 6 Pz
XXXX 5 Pz
XXXX 7
XXX 2 SS Pz
XXX I SS Pz
XXX 67
XXX 66
XXX 58
XXX 47 Pz
XXX 85
XXX 80
XXX 53
XX 102
XX 84
XX 9
XX 85
XX 5
XX 7
XX 104
XX 1
XX 3
XX 8
XX 78
XX 2
XX 99
XX 106
XX 6
XX 28
XX 4
XXXX 1 Can
XXXX 2 Br
XXXX 9 US
XXXX 1 US
XXXXX 21
XXXXX 12
Sixth Panzer Army objective
Fifth Panzer Army objective
Seventh Army objective
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Koblenz
Sinzig
Remagen
Mayen
Bonn
Cologne
Euskirchen
Düren
Jülich
Rheydt
Krefeld
Venlo
Roermond
Heinsberg
Geilenkirchen
Sittard
Susteren
Maastricht
Aachen
Eupen
Verviers
Spa
Monschau
Roer Dams
Schleiden
Stadtkyll
Daun
Wittlich
Trier
Bitberg
Prüm
Bleialf
Lützkampen
Dasburg
Vianden
Diekirch
Echternach
Wasserbillig
Grevenmacher
Ettelbruck
Mersch
Büllgenbach
Malmédy
Stavelot
Trois Ponts
St Vith
Baraque de Fraiture
Werbomont
La Roche
Ortheuville
Bastogne
Arlon
Attert
Neufchâteau
Libramont
Marche
Rochefort
Dinant
Givet
Huy
Liège
Namur
Charleroi
Louvain
Brussels
Antwerp
Sedan
Mezieres
Rhine
Erft
Roer
Ahr
Mosel
Our
Sure
Witz
Ourthe
Meuse
Lesse
Semois
Sambre
Scheldt
Albert Canal

6. **13.00hrs, 18 December. 1st Battalion, 9th Infantry finally withdraws with cover of four tanks from 741st Tank Battalion.**

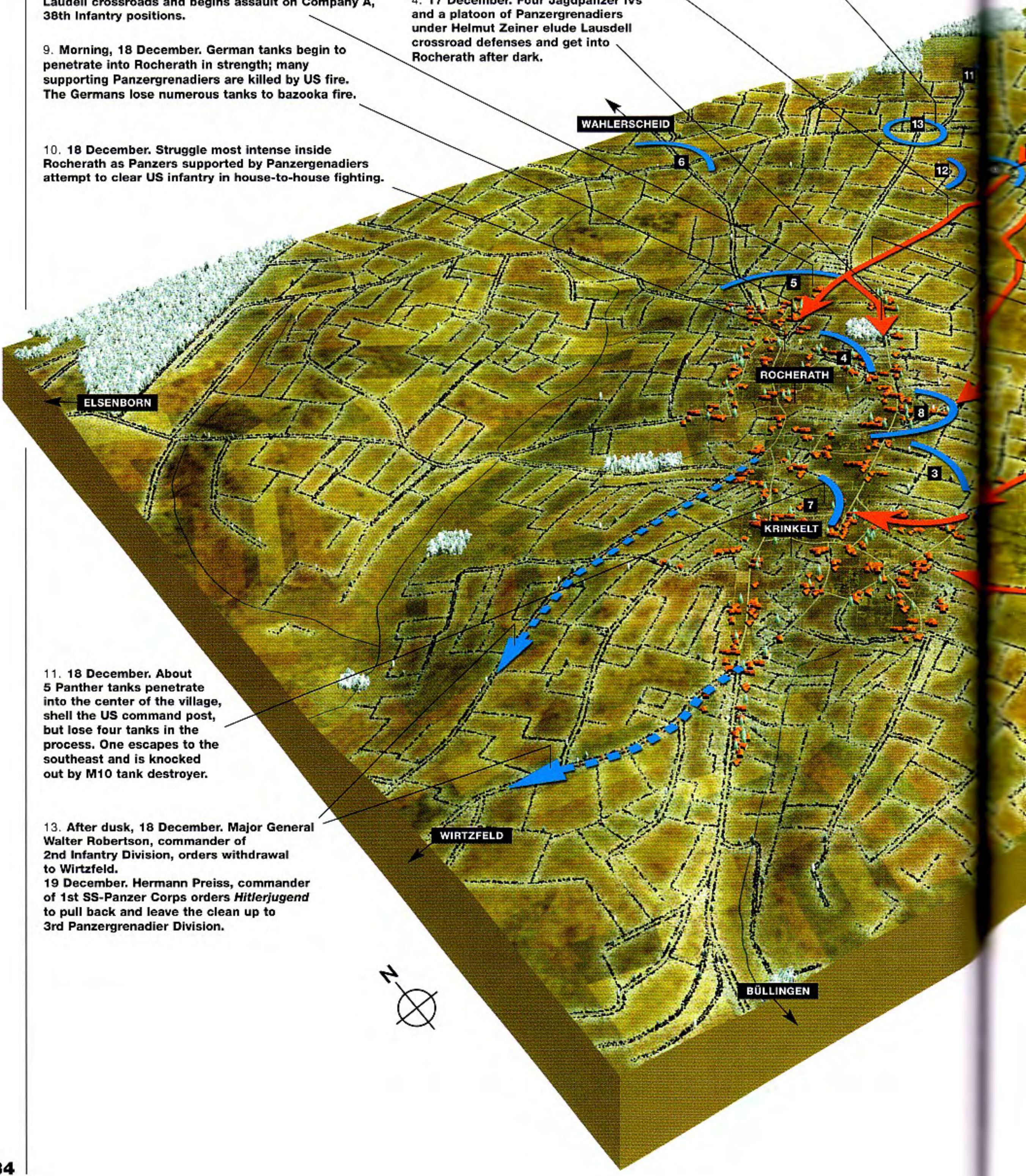
5. **08.30hrs 18 December. Company K, 9th Infantry finally overwhelmed by tank attack; only around one officer and ten soldiers withdraw.**

7. **18.40hrs 17 December. German armor avoids Laudell crossroads and begins assault on Company A, 38th Infantry positions.**

4. **17 December. Four Jagdpanzer IVs and a platoon of Panzergrenadiers under Helmut Zeiner elude Lausdell crossroad defenses and get into Rocherath after dark.**

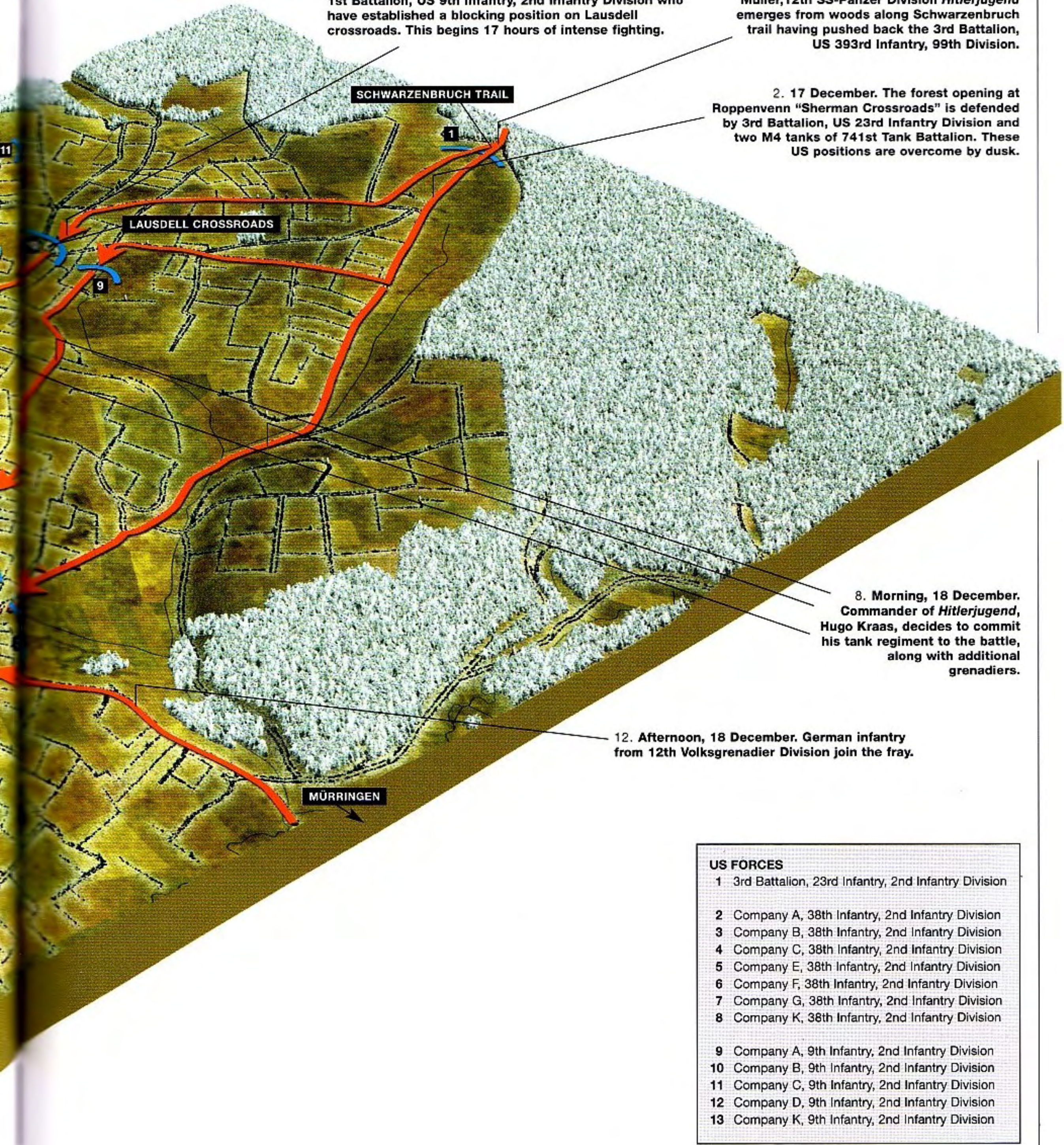
9. **Morning, 18 December. German tanks begin to penetrate into Rocherath in strength; many supporting Panzergrenadiers are killed by US fire. The Germans lose numerous tanks to bazooka fire.**

10. **18 December. Struggle most intense inside Rocherath as Panzers supported by Panzergenadiers attempt to clear US infantry in house-to-house fighting.**



11. **18 December. About 5 Panther tanks penetrate into the center of the village, shell the US command post, but lose four tanks in the process. One escapes to the southeast and is knocked out by M10 tank destroyer.**

13. **After dusk, 18 December. Major General Walter Robertson, commander of 2nd Infantry Division, orders withdrawal to Wirtzfeld.
19 December. Hermann Preiss, commander of 1st SS-Panzer Corps orders *Hitlerjugend* to pull back and leave the clean up to 3rd Panzergrenadier Division.**



3. **20.30hrs, 17 December. Kampfgruppe Müller attacks 1st Battalion, US 9th Infantry, 2nd Infantry Division who have established a blocking position on Lausdell crossroads. This begins 17 hours of intense fighting.**

1. **12.30hrs, 17 December. Kampfgruppe Müller,12th SS-Panzer Division *Hitlerjugend* emerges from woods along Schwarzenbruch trail having pushed back the 3rd Battalion, US 393rd Infantry, 99th Division.**

2. **17 December. The forest opening at Roppenvenn "Sherman Crossroads" is defended by 3rd Battalion, US 23rd Infantry Division and two M4 tanks of 741st Tank Battalion. These US positions are overcome by dusk.**

8. **Morning, 18 December. Commander of *Hitlerjugend*, Hugo Kraas, decides to commit his tank regiment to the battle, along with additional grenadiers.**

12. **Afternoon, 18 December. German infantry from 12th Volksgrenadier Division join the fray.**

US FORCES	
1	3rd Battalion, 23rd Infantry, 2nd Infantry Division
2	Company A, 38th Infantry, 2nd Infantry Division
3	Company B, 38th Infantry, 2nd Infantry Division
4	Company C, 38th Infantry, 2nd Infantry Division
5	Company E, 38th Infantry, 2nd Infantry Division
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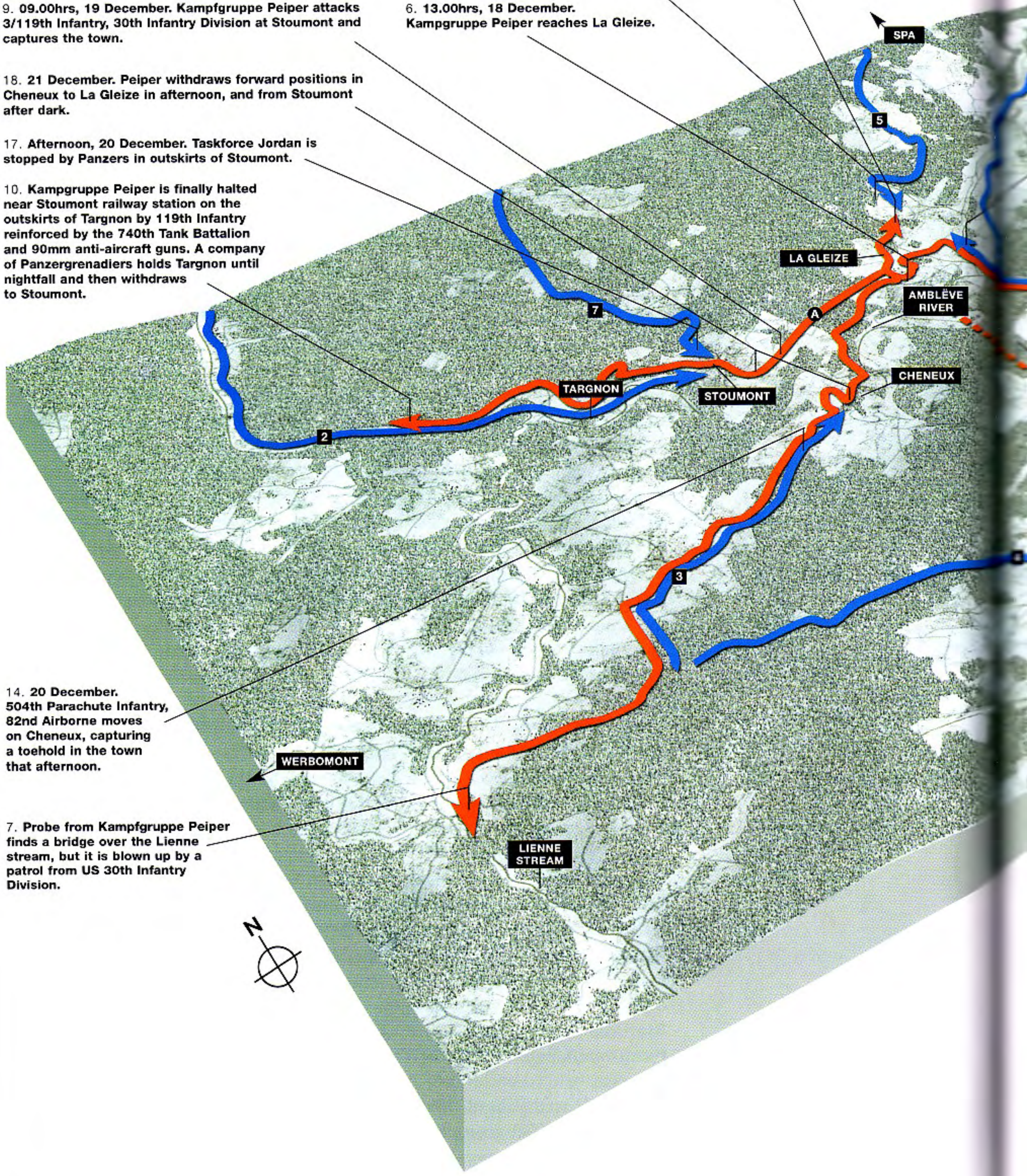
10	Company B, 9th Infantry, 2nd Infantry Division
11	Company C, 9th Infantry, 2nd Infantry Division
12	Company D, 9th Infantry, 2nd Infantry Division
13	Company K, 9th Infantry, 2nd Infantry Division

BATTLE FOR THE TWIN VILLAGES

17–18 December 1944, viewed from the south-west showing the series of costly attacks by 12th SS-Panzer Division *Hitlerjugend* on the twin villages of Krinkelt and Rocherath, defended by elements of US 38th and 9th Infantry Regiments, 2nd Infantry Division.



11. **Not realizing First US Army HQ is at Spa, Peiper sends a weak probe up the road, but it withdraws after encountering a roadblock.**

16. **Afternoon, 20 December. Taskforce McGeorge is stopped by a roadblock near Borgoumont.**

6. **13.00hrs, 18 December. Kampgruppe Peiper reaches La Gleize.**

9. **09.00hrs, 19 December. Kampfgruppe Peiper attacks 3/119th Infantry, 30th Infantry Division at Stoumont and captures the town.**

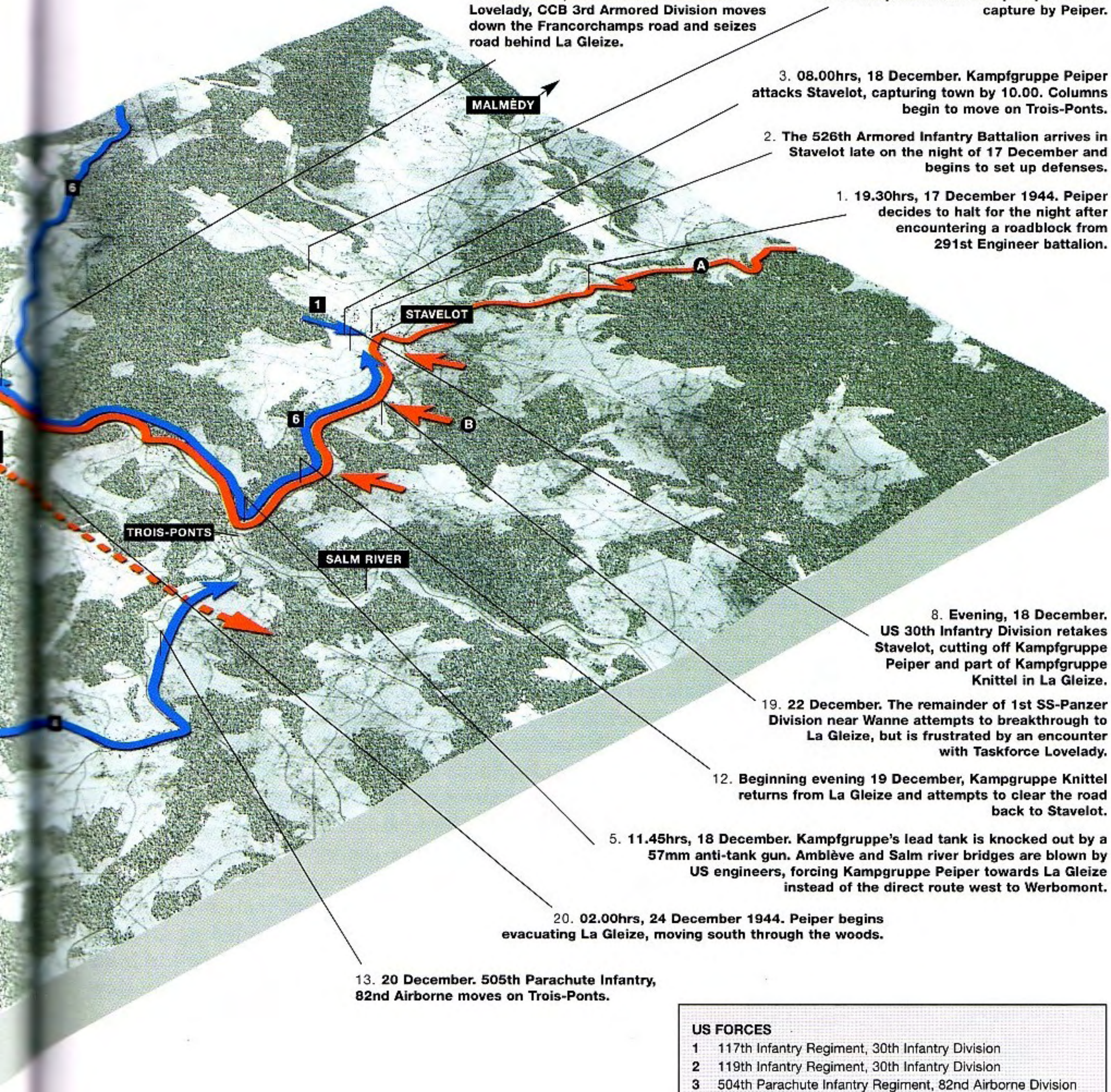
18. **21 December. Peiper withdraws forward positions in Cheneux to La Gleize in afternoon, and from Stoumont after dark.**

17. **Afternoon, 20 December. Taskforce Jordan is stopped by Panzers in outskirts of Stoumont.**

10. **Kampgruppe Peiper is finally halted near Stoumont railway station on the outskirts of Targnon by 119th Infantry reinforced by the 740th Tank Battalion and 90mm anti-aircraft guns. A company of Panzergrenadiers holds Targnon until nightfall and then withdraws to Stoumont.**

14. **20 December. 504th Parachute Infantry, 82nd Airborne moves on Cheneux, capturing a toehold in the town that afternoon.**

7. **Probe from Kampfgruppe Peiper finds a bridge over the Lienne stream, but it is blown up by a patrol from US 30th Infantry Division.**



15. **Afternoon, 20 December. Taskforce Lovelady, CCB 3rd Armored Division moves down the Francorchamps road and seizes road behind La Gleize.**

4. **US troops burn fuel dump to prevent its capture by Peiper.**

3. **08.00hrs, 18 December. Kampfgruppe Peiper attacks Stavelot, capturing town by 10.00. Columns begin to move on Trois-Ponts.**

2. **The 526th Armored Infantry Battalion arrives in Stavelot late on the night of 17 December and begins to set up defenses.**

1. **19.30hrs, 17 December 1944. Peiper decides to halt for the night after encountering a roadblock from 291st Engineer battalion.**

8. **Evening, 18 December. US 30th Infantry Division retakes Stavelot, cutting off Kampfgruppe Peiper and part of Kampfgruppe Knittel in La Gleize.**

19. **22 December. The remainder of 1st SS-Panzer Division near Wanne attempts to breakthrough to La Gleize, but is frustrated by an encounter with Taskforce Lovelady.**

12. **Beginning evening 19 December, Kampgruppe Knittel returns from La Gleize and attempts to clear the road back to Stavelot.**

5. **11.45hrs, 18 December. Kampfgruppe's lead tank is knocked out by a 57mm anti-tank gun. Amblève and Salm river bridges are blown by US engineers, forcing Kampgruppe Peiper towards La Gleize instead of the direct route west to Werbomont.**

20. **02.00hrs, 24 December 1944. Peiper begins evacuating La Gleize, moving south through the woods.**

13. **20 December. 505th Parachute Infantry, 82nd Airborne moves on Trois-Ponts.**

US FORCES

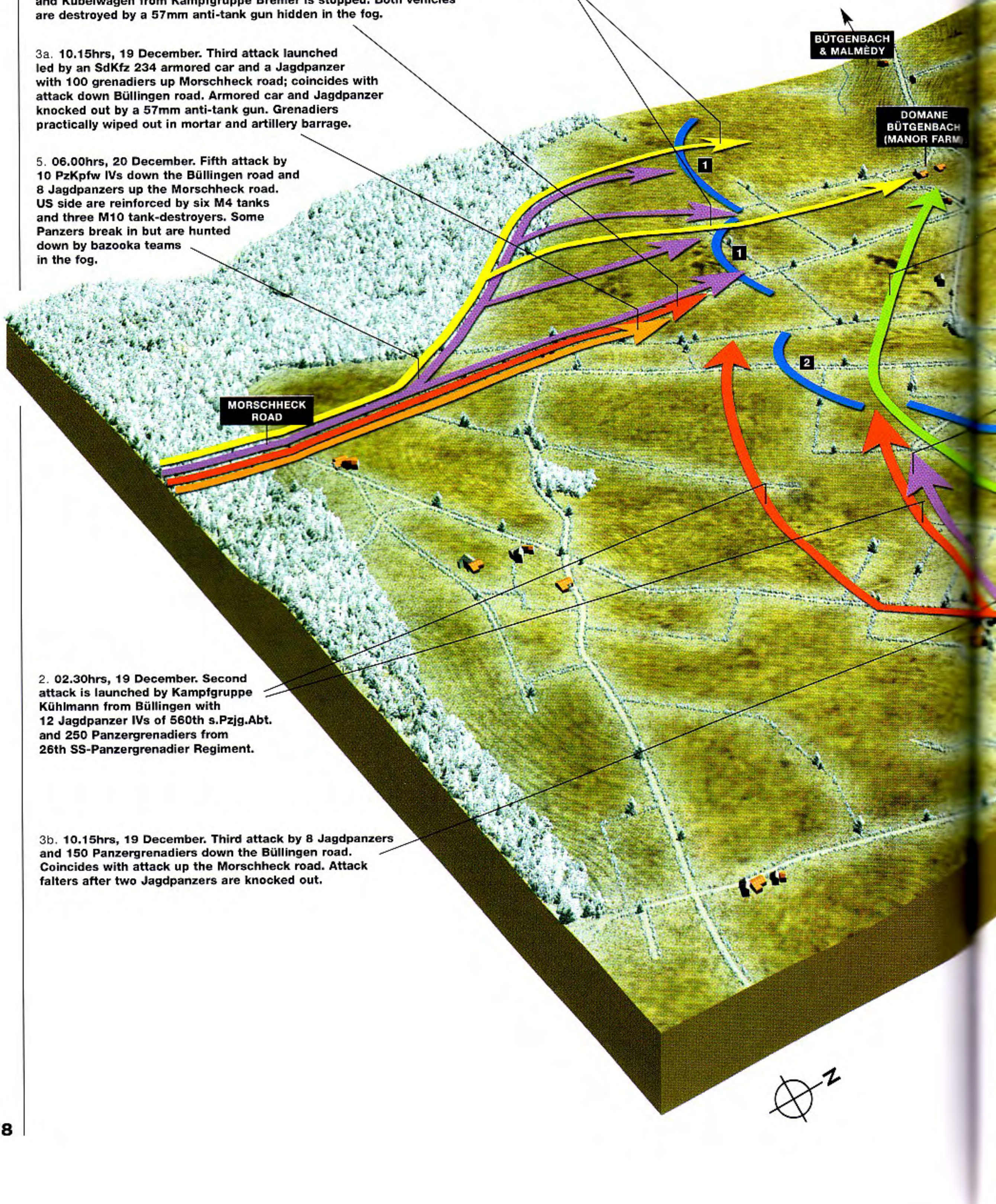
1	117th Infantry Regiment, 30th Infantry Division
2	119th Infantry Regiment, 30th Infantry Division
3	504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division
4	505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division
5	Taskforce McGeorge
6	Taskforce Lovelady, CCB 3rd Armored Division
7	Taskforce Jordan

GERMAN FORCES

A	Kampfgruppe Peiper
B	1st SS-Panzer Division *Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler*

KAMPFGRUPPE PEIPER 18–23 DECEMBER 1944

Viewed from the south-west, showing the increasingly desperate attempts by the battlegroup to open a viable route west towards the Meuse as the cordon of US units tightens around it.



6. **06.30hrs, 21 December. Sixth attack by three battalions of Panzergrenadiers up Morschheck road supported by Panzers; one battalion down Büllingen road. Attack from Morschheck road penetrates Company E lines and 8 PzKpfw IV tanks break into the manor grounds. Most are eventually hunted down and destroyed.**

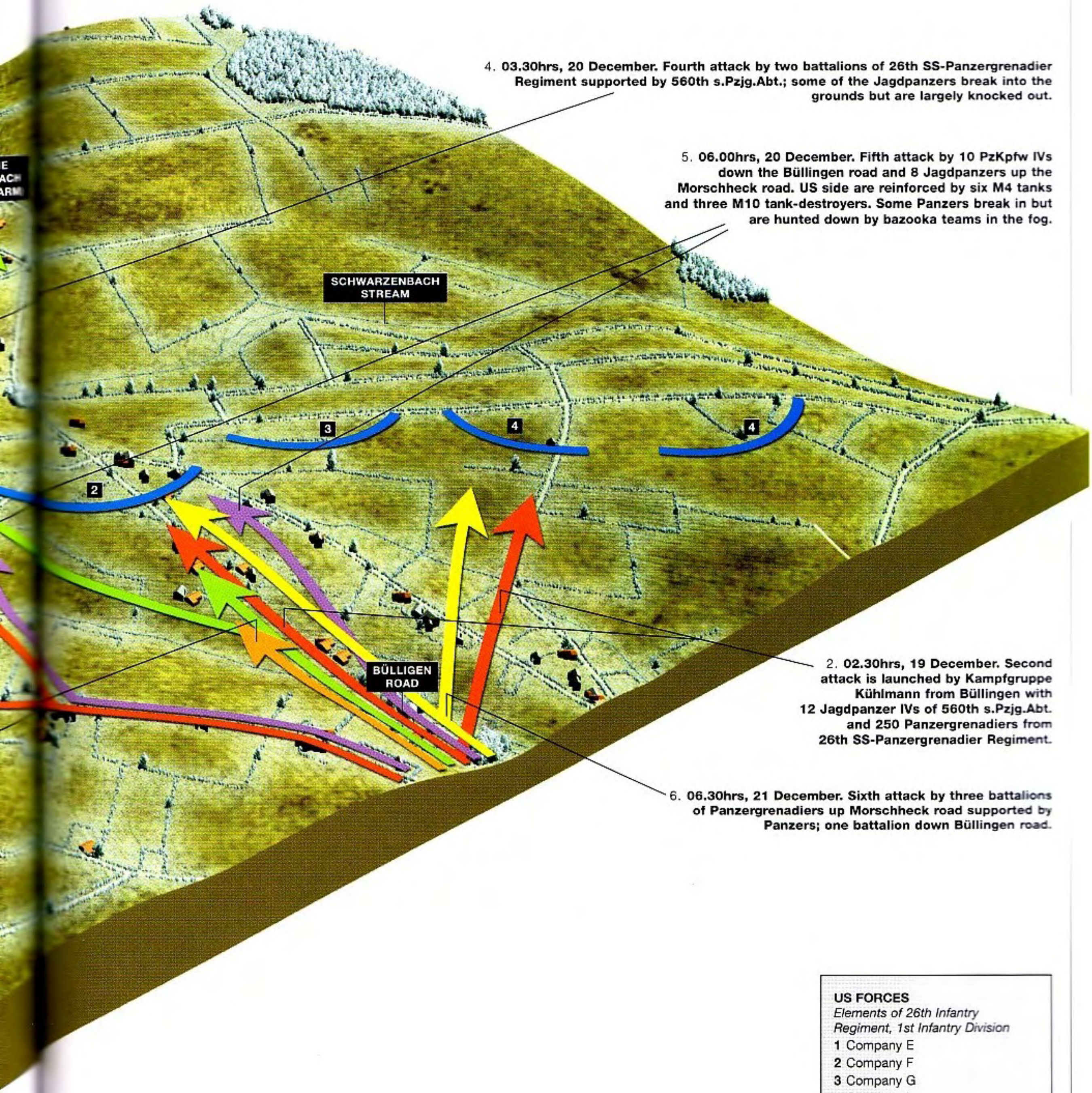
1. **12.10hrs, 18 December. First patrol by an SdKfz 234 armored car and Kubelwagen from Kampfgruppe Bremer is stopped. Both vehicles are destroyed by a 57mm anti-tank gun hidden in the fog.**

3a. **10.15hrs, 19 December. Third attack launched led by an SdKfz 234 armored car and a Jagdpanzer with 100 grenadiers up Morschheck road; coincides with attack down Büllingen road. Armored car and Jagdpanzer knocked out by a 57mm anti-tank gun. Grenadiers practically wiped out in mortar and artillery barrage.**

5. **06.00hrs, 20 December. Fifth attack by 10 PzKpfw IVs down the Büllingen road and 8 Jagdpanzers up the Morschheck road. US side are reinforced by six M4 tanks and three M10 tank-destroyers. Some Panzers break in but are hunted down by bazooka teams in the fog.**

2. **02.30hrs, 19 December. Second attack is launched by Kampfgruppe Kühlmann from Büllingen with 12 Jagdpanzer IVs of 560th s.Pzjg.Abt. and 250 Panzergrenadiers from 26th SS-Panzergrenadier Regiment.**

3b. **10.15hrs, 19 December. Third attack by 8 Jagdpanzers and 150 Panzergrenadiers down the Büllingen road. Coincides with attack up the Morschheck road. Attack falters after two Jagdpanzers are knocked out.**



4. **03.30hrs, 20 December. Fourth attack by two battalions of 26th SS-Panzergrenadier Regiment supported by 560th s.Pzjg.Abt.; some of the Jagdpanzers break into the grounds but are largely knocked out.**

5. **06.00hrs, 20 December. Fifth attack by 10 PzKpfw IVs down the Büllingen road and 8 Jagdpanzers up the Morschheck road. US side are reinforced by six M4 tanks and three M10 tank-destroyers. Some Panzers break in but are hunted down by bazooka teams in the fog.**

2. **02.30hrs, 19 December. Second attack is launched by Kampfgruppe Kühlmann from Büllingen with 12 Jagdpanzer IVs of 560th s.Pzjg.Abt. and 250 Panzergrenadiers from 26th SS-Panzergrenadier Regiment.**

6. **06.30hrs, 21 December. Sixth attack by three battalions of Panzergrenadiers up Morschheck road supported by Panzers; one battalion down Büllingen road.**

US FORCES
Elements of 26th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division
1 Company E
2 Company F
3 Company G
4 Company I

HITLERJUGEND HALTED AT DOM BÜTGENBACH

18–21 December, viewed from the south-east, showing the series of attack against the manor farm held by elements of US 26th Infantry Regiment. 12th SS-Panzer Division *Hitlerjugend* are subsequently withdrawn from this sector.